

THE EDMUND VASVÁRY COLLECTION

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Ethnic studies have gained new importance both in Hungary and in the United States. Historians from Hungary, such as S. Márki, I. Pivány, and more recently J. Puskás have dealt with the general features of Hungarian emigration and ethnicity in America, while on the American side there have been useful compilations on the subject by G. Kende and E. Lengyel. Ethnographers, literary and art historians are also determined to contribute to the study of this important subject. It has become widely realized and accepted by now that the largest Hungarian ethnic group outside the Carpathian Basin lives not in Europe but overseas, within the boundaries of the United States of America. Although this Hungarian population is rather scattered and occasionally the "victim" of the "melting pot", in its history, language, literature and traditions it shows many common traits. Today, therefore, a growing number of scholars of many disciplines find it worth their while to focus their attention on various aspects of this question.

Unfortunately, because of lack of relevant archival material and other sources about certain particulars or representatives of ethnic life, very often researchers had to face great difficulties. It is widely known that up to now—with the possible exception of collections on special topics, such as the Huziányi Collection in Budapest of the National *Széchenyi Library* on Kossuth's American relations—there has not existed in Hungary such a single important collection of sources or archival materials devoted to Hungarian ethnicity in the United States that could have served as a basis for further research on any aspect of the field.

Since 1849, the year of the defeat of the War of Independence, a great number of Hungarian immigrants have arrived in the New World in several waves. At the outbreak of the American Civil War they numbered approximately three thousand, and in the peak period of mass migration (around 1910) their number grew to some 350,000, while now well over a million Hungarians live in the United States as first or second generation naturalized citizens. From Hungary, a small nation, pioneers and emigrants with outstanding talents served the cause of the American nation in 1776, fought for the cause of the Union, and later continued as distinguished leaders of state, military and other affairs.

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In the service of George Washington and the War of Independence, Colonel Michael Kováts of Hungary fought the British in several battles. His cavalry unit subsequently engaged the British in South Carolina, where Kováts fell in battle. But more massive emigration of Hungarians to America started with the exiles following in Kossuth's wake. After 1849, many soldiers, officers and former political leaders found their way to the United States, the country whose short history as a republic had inspired them.

In 1851–52, during his historic visit to the States, Lajos Kossuth, in an effort to obtain moral and material help for a revival of Hungary's national struggle, delivered speeches in polished English to large audiences in almost all the big cities. After Lafayette, he was the second foreign dignitary ("The Nation's Guest") in American history to speak before the Joint Houses of Congress. At the outbreak of the Civil War, former Hungarian officers and other political refugees from Hungary, almost to a man, joined the cause of Lincoln to save the Union.

Let us examine the reasons why in later years thousands of Hungarians emigrated to the United States of America. The early emigrants of the 1890s and 1900s went so as to accumulate during a brief period some savings and return to their native village or town. At that time very few considered the thought of becoming American citizens. Some decades later, before and after the Second World War, besides poverty, escape from Nazism and other political reasons prompted emigration.

During their more than a century old history, the Hungarians of America have always endeavoured to preserve their identity as an ethnic group in the great "melting pot". Hungarian communities founded churches which became strongholds of their continuity; they established fraternal organizations, "burial and sick benefit societies", banks, schools and other social or cultural associations, so as to promote and share their common bonds of heritage. They have published numerous newspapers, periodicals and books and built up public as well as private library collections to meet their cultural needs. A renaissance of interest in things Hungarian and Hungarian heritage in America is evident and growing at present. For example, since 1959 the *American Hungarian Foundation* (one of the largest cultural organizations of its kind) has provided funds and grants for college and university programs of Hungarian studies. Interest in the Hungarian language is also encouraged in many ways.

In Hungary, research concerning the history of Hungarians in America and Hungarian-American historical connections, or exchange of cultural information have been encouraged by events such as trade agreements between Hungary and the United States or the return of King St. Stephen's Crown in the 1970s—signs of an improved relationship. In such circumstances, to serve purposes of research, and in accordance with Edmund Vasváry's deed of gift, in 1978 a unique collection of documents and books was finally transferred from Washington, D.C. to the *Somogyi Library* of Szeged.

The Edmund Vasváry Collection consists of 436 loose-leaf volumes containing extensive notes, citations, manuscripts, facsimile reproductions, news clippings, etc., concerning the most important ethnic Hungarians of America. They are grouped in

alphabetical order of the names of the persons to whom they refer. The Collection comprises also several hundred valuable rare books, chronicles, almanacs, pamphlets dealing with Hungarian history, literature and ethnicity. A catalogue of 20,000 bio- and bibliographical file cards along with the collected writings of E. Vasváry are also part of the Collection.

A clergyman and historian himself, Edmund Vasváry (1888–1977) devoted fifty years to the research of the history, literature and traditions of Hungarians in the United States, with records going back as early as 1583, the date when Stephanus Parmenius of Buda, the first Hungarian to do so, set foot in the New World. Born and educated in Szeged, Vasváry arrived in the United States in 1914 as a pastor of the Hungarian Reformed Church. After serving in several churches for a period of time, in 1936, he became comptroller of the *Hungarian Reformed Federation of America* in Washington, D.C., a post he held until his retirement in 1957. Among his several hundred articles and other publications his major work is *Lincoln's Hungarian Heroes* (Washington, D.C., 1939). In recognition of his "pioneering research, his dedication to the scholarly endeavour in behalf of those who are to follow him and for his commitment to enrich the American scene with a clearer appreciation of the role Hungarian pioneers and immigrants played in all walks of American life", in 1974 he was presented the Abraham Lincoln Award.

Vasváry, in the 1920s still a beginner, started his research with tackling the greatest of all American–Hungarian subjects: Kossuth's trip to the U.S. In doing so—he later wrote—he stumbled on one single short sentence, which became the most important motto or reminder for him, never to be forgotten. This short sentence was written by William L. Garrison, the leader of the movement for the abolition of slavery. Garrison became bitterly disappointed with Kossuth, because the great Hungarian refused to take sides in that gigantic internal conflict—saying that being a foreigner, the guest of the nation, it would be highly improper for him to do so. So Garrison, who shortly before had written a poem to Kossuth asking for his help, in his weekly *The Liberator*, hurled the following angry reproach to him: "You are a mere Hungarian—and nothing more!" Kossuth probably did not pay much attention to this remark—but it hit Vasváry very much. It reminded him forcefully that a Hungarian, if he lives in the United States, must be more than a "mere" Hungarian—and that more "can be nothing less but the totality of what the word American means".

And while during his 63 years in America he did his best to live up to the obligation implied by the above quote, to his own astonishment Vasváry found out "that there is no *small* nation on this earth, besides Hungary, that contributed more to the intellectual, scientific and industrial progress of the United States. There is no small nation that could come even near Hungary in this respect. I found out that the Hungarians in the United States have been and are much more than a mere ethnic group, which is satisfied with finding here a better livelihood and wants to be nothing more". The statement was made in 1974, and he then also pointed out the importance of his aim to collect any available document about his outstanding fellow countrymen. At that time he must have thought of those Hungarians who deserved to be

remembered but who would probably be much less known to posterity without collections of material such as his own.

The Collection, while providing basic sources and data for the history of Hungarian contributions to American life, puts special emphasis on subjects of outstanding importance such as Colonel Michael Kováts's role in the War of Independence, Lajos Kossuth's tour of the U.S., or Hungarian participation in the Civil War.

Vasváry was well aware of the sad fate of two earlier collections of this kind: those of Károly Feleky and Jenő Pivány. Between the two World Wars Feleky possessed the largest collection of books and manuscripts related to Hungarian-American relations and after his death it served as a basis for the *Hungarian Reference Library* of New York. Unfortunately, this unique collection fell victim of wartime tribulations; it was split up and its material was distributed among various libraries. A similar fate was destined to the historian Pivány's collection which perished during the siege of Budapest at the end of World War II. Thus it is easy to understand why Vasváry's collection, immediately after his death, was brought to one of the big libraries of Szeged, his native city, to be an indispensable depository for future research. (A microfilm copy of the Collection remained in the United States, in custody of the *American Hungarian Foundation* of New Brunswick, N.J.)

As it would be almost impossible to give a full description of the entire Collection, I only attempt here—in a more or less chronological order—to enumerate some of those items or entries that Vasváry himself considered as prominent parts of his Collection.

The afore-mentioned Stephanus Parmenius of Buda, no doubt, occupies a most important place in the history of Hungarian-American relations as well as in the Collection itself. A young clergyman of the Reformed Church and a foremost Latin poet of his time, he is considered the first Hungarian to have set foot on American soil, in the port of St. John's in New Foundland, Canada. The leader of an English expedition, Sir Humphrey Gilbert appointed him to be the official historian of the important adventure. Before they sailed from England, Parmenius, hoping to be included in the crew wrote a long Latin poem in hexameters, in which he envisions the possible emergence of a democratic world overseas:

*Quam nummos, quam lucra sequi, quam propter honores
Vivere ad arbitrium stolidae mutabile plebis.
Non illic generi virtus opibusve premetur
Libertas populi, non contra in deside vulgo
Oppugnabit opes, civis sub nomine, pauper:
Quisque suo partem foelix in iure capesset.
Tum sua magna parens ingenti foenore tellus
Exiguo sudore dabit bona: cura iuventam
Nulla adiget senio, nec sic labor ocia tollet
Quominus e virtute petant sua commoda cives.*

(De Navigatione, lines 147–156)

Together with Gilbert, he found his grave in the ocean in 1583. Parmenius, an important individual, is represented in the Collection by a separate volume.

The material on the Revolutionary War and its best known Hungarian officers, Colonel M. Kováts and Major John Pollereczky, a former Bercsényi-hussar in France, constitutes a considerable and extensive part of the Collection. The documents, facsimile reproductions, pamphlets and articles on the details of the period and its outstanding Hungarian personages occupy as many as thirteen volumes of bulky, loose-leaf notebooks.

The figure of Colonel Kováts was especially dear to Vasváry, so much so, that at the end of his life he planned to write a book on him. Kováts, second in command of the Pulaski Legion, is respected by many as the first of Hungarians to sacrifice his life for American freedom and independence. He suggested a slogan—as Vasváry pointed out—for the future generations of Hungarian Americans at the end of his letter written in Latin to Benjamin Franklin (January 13, 1777, Bordeaux, France), in which he offered his services for the American cause: "FIDELISSIMUS AD MORTEM"—"Most faithful unto death". He died before Charleston, South Carolina, on May 11, 1779.

Without attempting to draw up a complete list of all those outstanding 19th century Hungarian immigrants whose records are accessible in the Collection, special attention must be called to such pioneers as Sándor Bölöni Farkas or Ágoston Haraszthy, the father of Californian viticulture, both of them authors of the first Hungarian travelogues on the pre-Civil War U.S.A. in the 1830s and 1840s.

By far the most important and bulkiest section of the Collection is dedicated to Kossuth and to the so-called Kossuth Emigration. This includes Hungarians who in the armies of the North fought in the Civil War. Several of them became general officers, and one of them (J.H. Stahel) was awarded the highest military decoration of the nation, the Congressional Medal of Honor.

In thirty-four of the 436 notebooks of the Vasváry Collection, Kossuth's relationship with America is listed, discussed and documented. These include topics such as the details of his voyage to America on board the U.S.S. "Mississippi". It was Vasváry who found the report of Captain Long, commander of the steam frigate on which Kossuth sailed from his Turkish internment. There are documents on Kossuth's tour of the country: on his relations with Congress, the Government, with prominent politicians and personalities of the time. The Collection has the texts of Kossuth's speeches, material on his negotiations for the cause of Hungary; his views on slavery, politics, etc. A number of books, facsimile reproductions of contemporary articles from the press and pamphlets; manuscripts, charts, even musical scores bear witness to the deep impression Kossuth made on the American general public of his days.

Special volumes of notebooks are devoted to commemorative poetry, literature and music; to the description of festive occasions, geographical names of localities, traditions attached to Kossuth, along with the enumeration of the various memorabilia in the States, all to honour "The Nation's Guest". Besides giving a good picture of

Kossuth's figure in literature, the Collection contains excellent sources for research focusing on his image in the visual arts such as sculpture or portrait painting. Ever since the time when he visited America, Kossuth's memory has always been fondly cherished by ethnic Hungarians. For them it was a major event when in the early 1950s in Philadelphia, Vasváry discovered several of the long forgotten portraits of the great patriot and of his suite painted by a well-known American painter of the last century, Walter Gould.

Mention must also be made of at least such relevant rare books of the Collection as e.g. John Prágay's *The Hungarian Revolution* (New York, 1850); *Scenes of the Civil War in Hungary by an Austrian Officer* (Philadelphia, 1850); *Kossuth and His Generals* (Buffalo, 1852); Frost's *A Complete History of the Hungarian War* (New Haven); Teffts's *Hungary and Kossuth* (1852); *Reception of Gov. Kossuth* (Report of the Special Committee appointed by the Common Council of the City of New York, 1852), or Headley's *The Life of L. Kossuth* (Auburn, N.Y., 1852) and *Modern War* by Emeric Szabad (New York, 1863), etc. (Scholars interested in Kossuth are reminded here of the Huziányi Collection of Budapest).

From the period of the Kossuth Emigration (i.e. the 1850s and the 1860s) I would like to mention volumes of documents in the Edmund Vasváry Collection dedicated for example to Colonel John Prágay, member of the Lopez expedition to Cuba, or to the Martin Koszta Affair, both former officers of the Hungarian revolutionary army with memorable and tragic experiences in American service. But ample material can be found also on men such as László Madarász or Lázár Mészáros.

As regards participation in the Civil War, great names of the several hundred, duly recorded in the Collection, include Major Generals Sándor Asboth and Gyula Stahel-Számwald; Brigadier General György Pomutz; Colonels Károly Zágonyi, Géza Mihalotzy, Miklós Perczel, János Fiala, etc. Seventy-five years later President F. D. Roosevelt in a letter addressed to the *Hungarian Reformed Federation of America*, expressed highest acknowledgment with the following words: "Men of Hungarian blood—many of them exiles from their fatherland—rendered valiant service to the cause of the Union. Their deeds of self-sacrifice and bravery deserve to be held in everlasting remembrance." (Facsimile copy of the letter in the Collection, dated March 15, 1939.) Countless articles, illustrations and biographical notes make it possible for the researcher to create a more perfect image about these heroes, whose names have been immortalized by Pivány and Vasváry. Three additional volumes of the Collection, entitled *Lincoln and the Hungarians*, allow better approach to the subject matter.

If we wanted to recall and enumerate the names of at least all those Hungarian immigrants and their descendants who, in one way or another, contributed considerably to postbellum American civilization and whose records are duly preserved in the Collection, we would be faced with an *embarras de choix*. The following descriptive list, which is far from being complete, is a somewhat arbitrary selection of material contained in the Collection and relative to some Hungarians who brought a noteworthy contribution to American life:

First of all, we would like to mention the name of Joseph Pulitzer, born in Makó in 1847. He deserves priority not only because, as a penniless youth, he went to the New World to take part in the Civil War as a Union soldier and later became editor and manager of several of America's largest newspaper enterprises; or because he turned out to be an innovator of the daily press and a prominent figure in the American society of his day. More importantly, he wrote his name in the golden book of American civilization by endowing the Pulitzer Prizes; a fund that is used every year to reward and honour the best achievements in literature, drama, journalism, historiography and music, as a symbol of highest recognition and a means of encouragement in the intellectual sphere.

In the world of science, great Americans from Hungary include such personages as Theodore von Karman, the "Elder statesman of aviation"; the Nobel laureates: physicist Eugene P. Wigner and biologist Albert Szent-Györgyi; the eminent nuclear scientists, Leo Szilárd and Edward Teller; physicist Zoltán Bay. At Princeton University, the *Institute for Defense Analysis* is housed in a new building, *John von Neumann Hall*, honouring the great Hungarian-born mathematical genius, who "gave so generously of his rare gifts of mind for the defense of his adopted land and the cause of freedom".

Other great Americans of Hungarian background, duly represented in the Collection, include Joseph Galamb, first chief engineer and principal draftsman of Model T of the Ford motor cars; Adolph Zukor, "Mr. Motion Pictures", founder of Paramount; Peter C. Goldmark, "the maverick inventor", who headed CBS Laboratories until his retirement and developed the LP record and colour television broadcasting; John G. Kemeny, President of Dartmouth College and noted mathematician; Marcel Breuer, the outstanding architect. In literature and arts: Ferenc Molnár, novelist and playwright; Arthur Koestler, writer and essayist; Joseph Reményi, writer, poet and critic; eminent symphony orchestra conductors: Fritz Reiner, George Solti, George Széll, Antal Dorati and Eugene Ormandy; László Moholy-Nagy, the well-known Bauhaus artist, foremost among refugees from Hitler who introduced the European revolution in modern art, architecture, industrial design and art education to American students; or American-born Stevan Dohanos, the famous artist and illustrator.

Much more space would be required for a description of all the other biographical entries of the Collection. Many of these may be different from those just referred to, but equally important in their content. Mention should also be made of the excellent source material referring to specific topics; for example, the general features and characters of the Hungarian literary scene in the United States, including some remarkable poetry and translations into English of Petőfi; the activity and reception of noted Hungarian artists in the musical and theatrical life; the development of Church organizations with all their representative personages; the efforts of the Horthy régime to bring about "official" contacts with the Magyars of America between the World Wars, along with the less constructive but significant overseas activities of one-time Hungarian politicians (such as e.g. Tibor Eckhardt); or details

about the United States, keeping King St. Stephen's Crown after World War II; the history of American-Hungarian journalism; or the state and conditions of Hungarian Studies as a discipline at American colleges and universities nowadays.

The preparation of various name and subject indexes essential for more comprehensive research in the Collection was finished in 1983. At the same time the preparation of a publication of Edmund Vasváry's selected writings, entitled „*Magyar Amerika*”, is also under way as part of a further plan for the future. The project is being sponsored by the Historical Institute of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences and the Somogyi Library.

Donations of correspondence materials or other documents together with new acquisitions, mainly books and articles from the press, are also being added to the Collection, in a permanent effort to keep it as up to date as possible. The Collection, a provincial centre for American Ethnic Studies in Hungary, has already attracted a number of scholars, writers, students and journalists. In February 1981, the Hungarian Television presented to a nationwide audience a film report featuring the Collection and its most interesting documents.

In August 1984 a detailed description of the Vasváry Collection was published in Szeged (*Mutató a Vasváry-gyűjteményhez*, összeállította Csillag András, Szeged, A Somogyi-könyvtár kiadványai 30., pp. 167) with detailed index of the complete material.)

On the Vasváry Collection see further details on pp. 84–85 in this issue of *Hungarian Studies*. About the latest projects see the report by László Péter „*A Vasváry-gyűjtemény a szegedi Somogyi-Könyvtárban*” in *Hungarológiai Értesítő* IV:1–4, (1982) pp. 602–605. (Editorial remark)