

# AT HOME IN THE UNITED STATES: ASSIMILATION WITHOUT THE BETRAYAL OF ROOTS

ENIKŐ MOLNÁR-BASA

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The topic of national identity has been much discussed, yet one aspect is, I believe, often neglected. Namely, that this identification with one's background is not only retained in those who form a community apart from the mainstream of the majority culture, but also by those who seem thoroughly assimilated into the culture of the majority. Those who study this topic tend to focus on its manifestations in groups, or the lack of such factors as belonging to a Hungarian community, supporting ethnic institutions, etc. In the latter case, the conclusion generally is that the person or group has lost its identity and has succumbed to the melting pot. But all of the parameters in which the maintenance of ethnic consciousness is defined are dependent on living in ethnic centers, or at least fairly close to them, and keeping close contacts with ethnic communities and networks. This is well and good, and such contact has much to offer. It also has its drawbacks, chiefly in that assimilation into the life of the host country is hindered. The danger exists that the immigrant — and even his children — will never really feel at home in the United States or Canada. He will not be comfortable with its social customs and business life, in its professional and political life, always comparing these to his former country and its customs.

During this conference, however, I was glad to hear other views on what constitutes the retention of ethnic identity represented, although the views did not surprise me, especially coming as they did from men such as John Lukács and Edward Teller, whose phrase "hagyományok együttélése" struck me as particularly apt. What I hope to present in this paper is that this double identity, or more appropriately "dual consciousness" (to use Károly Nagy's phrase) is not necessarily restricted to the first generation immigrant, but can be extended to the second, in some instances even to the third generation.

I wish to call attention to the sense of Hungarian-ness preserved in those who have moved into the mainstream without giving up their Hungarian identity and made a virtue of the differences. The inaugural issue of *Erdélyi Magyarság* has an article by "Ács" that states this well: "akik magyar szülők gyermekeiként valamilyen távoli idegen országban születtek, az vált szülőföldjükké vagy hazájukká. Azzá vált fizikailag, annak ellenére, hogy lelki hazájuk tán továbbra is szüleik vagy nagyszüleik szülőföldje, itt valahol a Duna-Tisza mentén, a Kárpát-medencében. Lehet, hogy még nem volt módjukban személyesen felkeresni. Lehet, hogy csak elbeszélésből, képeslapokról

ismerik, mégis vonzódnak hozzá. Vonzódnak hozzá, holott már csak törik a magyar nyelvet, vagy soha nem is beszélték azt.”<sup>1</sup>

It is not necessary, therefore, to know Hungarian to possess a sense of Hungarian identity. This should be clear enough from a comparison with other nationalities. How many Irish-Americans know Gaelic, or even Italian-Americans Italian? How many Polish or Lithuanian Americans know those languages? Yet, I often hear accusations that one cannot be a Hungarian without a command of the language. Even more, much of the effort to instill a sense of identity is concentrated on language instruction. Such efforts can be counterproductive if the language is forced on unwilling children. Further, all the energy the individual or the community is able to muster is often exhausted in teaching language and other values are neglected. As Lajos Éltető remarked in an interview: “a család nem elég arra, hogy egyedül tanítson nyelvet s minden egyebet”.<sup>2</sup> He does not elaborate on the “minden egyebet”, but the implications are clear.

Again, retaining a sense of national identity does not mean being part of an ethnic community or even being active in ethnic organizations. It is an internal matter that can — and ideally does — have external repercussions but which should not be defined in external terms. Thus, the studies which assign the four broad categories of Hungarian immigrants certain characteristics ignore those who have largely moved beyond the confines of ethnic communities — physically or mentally. If indeed they ever belonged to them. Such persons can be members of any of the four broad categories of Hungarian immigrants, but it is generally in connection with the 1949–50 refugees and the 1956 group that this oversight occurs. They are dismissed as “assimilated”. As if that were a negative process. I am thinking here of comments made by Béla Várdy in his book on Hungarians in America,<sup>3</sup> as well as at conferences and symposia. He characterized the first group of refugees as educated persons who settled in the old ghettos and sunk into occupations beneath their training and original status. Under the circumstances, of course, involvement in Hungarian affairs was an escape. Such activity, however, was restricted to the Hungarian community and not carried into their everyday lives. To some extent their children developed the same mentality. The 56ers, on the other hand, are dismissed as having assimilated so quickly that they abandoned their Hungarian background. This assessment completely ignores the many members of this diaspora who did not settle in ghettos and who made new lives for themselves, created new careers, and who moved into their new environments without the psychological problems attributed to the others. To a large extent this is the path taken by the 1956 refugees also. This group can not be dismissed, however, for not only did they retain their Hungarian identity, they passed it on to their children, and even acquainted their neighbors with this culture which was so much a part of their lives.

As a footnote to the debate on which group preserved its heritage better, and which passed on its sense of a Hungarian identity most successfully, we should reflect that while the earlier ones saw the possibility for such preservation in institutions based and maintained in the United States, the later ones (1956 and since) recognized the possibility of doing this through visits to Hungary and through active cultural contacts with Hungary.<sup>4</sup> As was pointed out in connection with the Hungarian and American-

Hungarian linguistic debate also, today's technology — and now even political realities — make this in increasingly viable option.

Assimilation is not a negative process. It is a positive one if used wisely. Assimilation should not mean the denial of one's heritage, one's roots. It should mean the enrichment of this heritage by a new one and of the new affinities by the cultural and emotional values of the old. We Hungarians are fond of quoting St. Stephen's *Intelmek* that foreigners should be welcomed because a nation is poor if inhabited only by one people. But, for the multi-national or ethnic society to work, a process of assimilation, of harmonization must occur. We cannot think in the terms an acquaintance from New Jersey professed: that he was an American from nine in the morning until five in the afternoon, and a Hungarian the rest of the time.

The question, however, might be asked: if these individuals, however faithful to their Hungarian identity, do not live in groups and form a community, what good is this sense of identity? And how permanent is it? Will their children and possibly grandchildren also remember their Hungarian roots? Can they, should they, be considered as Hungarians? The answer of course is an emphatic yes. They are Hungarians, and yes, they can do a great deal of good. It can be permanent enough to be passed onto the second and third generation. As "Ács" pointed out in the article I already cited, identity is associated with choice. A person is what he professes to be. Of the 1.8 million Hungarians in the U. S. census, only a fraction were born in Hungary, speak Hungarian, or even know much about Hungary. But they still identify with Hungary.

Similarly, the 1950 and 1956 refugees — and their children and grandchildren — identify with Hungary even if they no longer speak the language or live in a Hungarian community. They are propagandists for Hungary and its culture, and often more effective than ethnic/emigre publications or pronouncements can be. They can reach the majority audience not only because they know it better, but also because that audience is already interested, already involved with its colleagues, friends, or acquaintances. They are also more likely to do this in English and thus reach those who are unfamiliar with Hungarian culture, rather than Hungarian and reach those who probably share some of the same values anyway. I remember numerous occasions when members of my family were asked about Hungary in places such as Alabama and Oklahoma, Virginia and North Carolina. Sometimes we were requested to give a formal presentation, sometimes only to answer the general interest of teachers or colleagues. In 1956 the local television station wanted some background on Hungary. One of the colleagues asked me to speak, although I was still in high school. I know of other such instances, and there were doubtless many, many more.

Another way in which the personal conviction of national identity — as opposed to the organized one — is effective is in setting an example. Successful people are admired, and this casts its glow on the persons' national or ethnic background also. There are, of course, those who distinguished themselves and rose to the top of their careers. Some became internationally recognized even outside their careers. But there are many who earned the respect of their community, city, or state, or achieved prominence in

their profession. And in many cases this meant a change in careers on the part of men Béla Várdy has described as "declassé".

Those lawyers, landowners or military officers who did not think in terms of the past in a ghetto mentality but chose a new career did prosper. Some became high-ranking civil servants; a former naval officer in the Danube fleet became a Vice-President of the Lone Star Brewery in San Antonio, Texas. Nor was he the only one: the San Antonio Hungarian community that celebrated the opening of a Hungarian exhibit at the Institute of Texan Cultures last fall is made up of persons of similar backgrounds and experiences. While there are no Hungarian schools or churches and the community is scattered over the region, the Hungarian Club participates in the annual ethnic fiesta and demonstrates Hungarian culture to the community at large. The exhibit documents the same sort of involvement: it emphasizes the achievements of individual settlers and their contribution to Texan culture. Their contribution as Hungarians. Such examples could be multiplied in many Southern and Western states, and I suspect it is the rule rather than the exception in California. It is certainly the pattern for Hungarian immigrants who did not have the presumed "refuge" of ethnic communities.

Retaining a sense of national identity while becoming a part of the majority culture need not be incompatible or incongruous. Someone who feels "at home" in the United States or Canada finds it natural to bring his knowledge of Hungarian culture to bear on any relevant topic. In school, for example, assignments are approached from this aspect. Or, academic forums provide the opportunities. The Atlantic Studies series is a good example, as are the publications of Katharina Wilson at the University of Georgia. She has seen to it that Hungarian women writers are represented in the books she has edited.

The awareness of the American public about Hungary is best served by those who are within the mainstream and thus speak from a position of strength. Schools, clubs, associations that remain centered on the ethnic community often do not have an impact on the wider world. While they can be sources of information, the information imparted here must go beyond their confines to affect those who are not Hungarian, who do not share the same cultural background, the same perception of world events, or possibly even the same values. A few years ago at a similar forum here in Bloomington Lajos Éltető bemoaned the fact that Americans do not know Hungary well, and that many misconceptions or even falsehoods are found in textbooks at all levels. This might very well be the case; but, someone who considers himself a part of the American mainstream, not an observer from the outside, would simply correct the errors of fact, clear up the misconceptions, and inform his neighbors rather than rail at a lack of knowledge. Of course, this has to be done with tact and with a good command of the facts. And it should take American attitudes into consideration. Thus, one who is not at home in American life will have a hard time conveying his ideas effectively. So will one whose sense of identity is based on sentiment and emotion without adequate intellectual background. There should not be a split between a private "Hungarian" and a public "American" self.

And what is the role of language? I believe it is useful but not crucial. Hungarian

identity can be retained without a command of the language — and lost with it. “Ács” addressed this question in “Nyelvcseré előtt, nyelvcseré után” by stating: “Vallom, hogy igenis, lehetnek. Lehetnek azok is [magyarok], akik szüleikkel együtt még gyermekként hagyták itt az országot s évtizedek óta, idegen nyelvkörnyezetben élve szinte már csak törik az anyanyelvüket. Miért ne lehetnének? ... Egy nemzethez, egy kultúrához való tartozás mindig is vállalás kérdése.” Of the close to two million Hungarian-Americans he estimates that more than half no longer know Hungarian: “Nem beszél a magyar nyelvet, mert már nem az anyanyelve. S mégis, valami azt súgja nekik, hogy ők magyarok. Vállalták és vállalják a kötődést a magyarság egészében.”<sup>5</sup>

He is, of course, right. I know a retired scientific researcher for example, who has found her relatives in Hungary through researching her family tree. She speaks no Hungarian, yet her interest in Hungary and Hungarian events is keen. She has visited there and plans to return to get to know the country and the people better. And while her lineage includes the usual American mix of other nationalities, her “identity” is Hungarian.

In conclusion, then, not only can national identity be preserved even with assimilation, but it can also be advantageous for the individual, the Hungarian-American community, Hungary, and not the least, the United States. For the individual because he can most fully live his life without an identity crisis — however fashionable this might be. For the Hungarian-American community, because it is thus represented by those who are familiar with the American system and who have a wide network of friends and acquaintances in the majority population sympathetic to the Hungarian cause. The most successful lobbying efforts capitalized on this. For Hungary, because there is a sympathetic and often knowledgeable population in the United States and Canada who can work for Hungarian interests and help cement relations between the two countries. And for the United States, because it has a group of experts who can educate, advise and inform about a part of the world not familiar to the majority.

#### Notes

1. “Ács”, *Erdélyi Magyarság* 1/1 (1990. febr.), 26.
2. Miklós Kontra, “Változnak a csillagok felettünk; beszélgetés Éltető Lajossal”, *Tiszatáj* (1990. jan.), 89.
3. Steven Béla Várdy, *The Hungarian Americans* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1985).
4. For this insight I am indebted to my sister Emese Molnár Bagley.
5. “Ács”, *op. cit.* p. 26.