

# REFLECTIONS ON THE HISTORICAL CONSCIOUSNESS OF HUNGARIANS IN NORTH AMERICA

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More than twenty years ago, a Hungarian poet from Transylvania visited the United States and commented to me that he could foresee not much more than twenty years for the future of some form of Hungarian life in the United States, or for that matter in North America generally. Although much has changed these past twenty years, Hungarian life continues to be visible in this part of the world, although in different forms and motivated by different values, under altered demographic conditions and ever-changing political opinions; new or renewed institutional structures exist alongside the previous ones. In sum, there has been now, as throughout the history of the presence of Hungarians in North America, an ongoing change — possibly development — in the historical consciousness of many generations and individuals. The mutations of this historical consciousness in the life and work of Hungarians in North America should thus be examined.

I approach the initial task for the elucidation of this theme with some trepidation because of numerous definitional issues inherent in the concept of historical consciousness; nonetheless a working characterization of the term is necessary. In its simplest form, I would say that historical consciousness is the use of what is remembered and internalized about the past and the manner in which all that shapes and impacts our life and destiny. However, I also wish to cite from the *Pensées* of Pascal: "In every action we must consider, besides the act itself, our present, past, and future conditions, and others whom it touches, and must see the connexion of it all. And so we shall keep ourselves well in check." More briefly: "Memory is necessary for all operations of the Reason" (*Pensées*, 389).

From all this it should be quite evident that a discussion of the past as remembered by Hungarians in North America at different times may well be instructive in terms of understanding something of the attitudes and values of these people. My concern now will be not so much with the specifics of these historical attitudes and the changes wrought in them, but rather with the study of the concept itself and the transformations it underwent as it manifested itself in the life of Hungarians in North America.

The use of the terms commonly associated with departure from one's land of birth or some form of continuation of the values attached to that land of birth by the first, second, or subsequent generations, already reveals something of the historical consciousness of those peoples who have undergone this experience. Certain terms and

characterizations commonly used point to differences seldom examined. Allow me to list a number of terms commonly employed for this: immigrant, emigrant, emigré, refugee, settler, resettler, expelled, displaced person, exile, expatriate and escapee come to mind. The fact that persons choosing one of these terms or forced to choose one, are to a great extent determined in this choice (or the lack of it) by their condition, values, goals, or aspirations; obviously, this condition or situation can be passed on to subsequent generations. In that case the terms used more properly are ethnic or hyphenated American, multicultural citizen, foreign born, minority, among others. Here again, a historical consciousness is passed on to a subsequent generation or descendants of immigrants or refugees, which then influence to a greater or lesser extent the historical consciousness of such an individual, quite naturally with varying degrees of success or failure in maintaining a heritage.

Let us, however, return to the discussion of the meaning of these terms in the Hungarian context, evaluating and exemplifying the impact of the condition specific to a particular term in the context of historical consciousness. One brief comment is nonetheless necessary before doing this; in terms of the impact exercised by the use of these terms on our consciousness, it makes a substantial difference if an individual is characterized by one of these terms by other or self. For example, someone may self-define as an exile while being treated as an immigrant by the public authorities; this can have a variety of impacts on one's historical consciousness and the adaptation to the changed circumstances. The specific mixture of historical attitudes which individuals bring with themselves to a new land and how they adapt to that new land are shaped by self-perception as well as by the patterns of adjustment made possible by the altered conditions. It is not really possible to document more than the potential sources of the influences upon the historical consciousness of any individual or group — among the possible sources being the educational system (especially history textbooks), family background, the role of the media, the cultural milieu, and social and political involvements, among many others. Even so, it is still useful to examine, if only episodically, such an intensely personal phenomenon as historical consciousness; the past we use, even if only subconsciously, impels us toward the intersection points of our lives and impacts directly upon our individual human destinies, even if this all occurs of necessity in a social context. Something this intensely personal is best examined on the episodic level and from this one can venture some observations about emerging patterns which may lead to tenuous — hopefully meaningful — conclusions.

Let us now deal with the specific definitions of the terms applicable to the act of leaving one's place of birth and the conditions of being the descendant of someone who has left one's homeland and passed on something of the historical consciousness adhering to the place of birth. Emigrate and immigrate are the two most widely used words to describe the act of moving from or entering into a country and the difference between the two words focuses on the act of leaving or entering; while a useful distinction, the two terms generally refer to the two ends of the same process, but if looked at from the perspective of historical consciousness or motivation, the difference can be staggering. One example from the Hungarian context may well illustrate the

difference on this level. It has been stated in any number of writings about the Hungarian emigration that "kitántorgott több mint százezer..." (more than a 100 000 tottered out). The very use of these words denotes a process that impacted negatively not only on those who left, but also on those concerned with the loss of this mass of humanity to the Hungarian homeland and one may also — I believe validly — stress the fact that these emigrants had been mostly abandoned by the architects of the Hungarian dream-world of the fin-de-siècle era. Nonetheless, these emigrants still retained a sense of and attachment to the Hungarian past even after their arrival and eventual settlement in North America; their historical consciousness remained a sentimental one and for that reason exceedingly difficult to transmit to the next generation. To further compound the matter, many left with a desire to return and thus their sense of a historically based feeling of attachment was focused on the hope of returning to a Hungary socially transformed. This was not to happen and many of these motivations to return were frustrated by events beyond their control. This too, in my estimation, impacted negatively on their Hungarian consciousness and turned many in the direction of an American–Hungarian consciousness.

Turning now at this point to the word immigration one must inevitably state that on their arrival they became immigrants *to* the United States or Canada and the change wrought upon them by their arrival, or rather as a consequence of it, also transformed whatever historical consciousness they had brought with them. The impending prospect of living and working under changed circumstances wrenched them out of a prior style of life (whether they attached positive or negative values to that is at this level not a substantive issue, although it became one eventually) and they had to adapt without any sense of the historically developed patterns of life so essential to simply living in any society. I may just note at this juncture that this was one of the reasons for the establishment of self-help societies. However, as immigrants now, they of necessity adapted to the changed conditions by internalizing to a greater or lesser extent the American historical consciousness necessary for life in this new world. Obviously this caused problems and conflicts not only on the level of political and socio-economic adjustment, but less visibly and no less significantly resulted in conflicts and inner struggles on the level of historical consciousness; these tribulations were inevitably faced, seldom resolved satisfactorily, and for many years for some, fewer for others, agitated the consciousness of virtually all immigrants. I might note that this is a constant and ever-present theme — in addition to their daily problems and successes — in their correspondence as well as in their poetry and popular culture generally. Seen from the perspective of changes and adaptations in their historical consciousness, the terms emigration and immigration take on — hopefully — an added and more nuanced meaning.

One of the presidents of the United States during the peak immigration years (1880 to 1920), Woodrow Wilson, recognized that the rootlessness of the numerous immigrants was one of America's great tragedies. Certainly the newly arrived and mostly peasant immigrants had indeed been uprooted from the soil were placed upon the unyielding concrete crust of urban America or had to suffocate in the mills of the heavy

industries or were thrust deep into the darkness of American mines. The consciousness and cares born of this new immigrant life inevitably led to either the attenuation or surrender of the prior culture without anything substantial or rooted to take its place. Consequently, this resulted in a hybrid historical consciousness and the difficult search for a new sense of community, sometimes found, just as often not. It should thus not be shocking to witness the transformation, or much too often the decline and ultimate loss, of the prior historical sensibilities. Simply put, not everyone was capable of maintaining the essentials of a prior historical consciousness in a new land. Thus began the process which led to the gradual attenuation of Hungarian culture in North America, a process that seems inevitable, even with the continued arrival of new immigrants. However, this also raises the corresponding question of how long Hungary can sustain emigration, given its own demographic and attendant economic and social problems in our century and beyond. The analysis of these issues, however, falls beyond the scope of this essay.

Looking at the other words used to describe the condition of leaving one's homeland, a similar analysis of an episodic nature should be attempted. The term *émigré* is often used, in my estimation, to characterize someone who has left someplace, but never really arrived elsewhere; the attachment to a prior historical consciousness is simply too strong or stubborn to accept the reality of becoming an immigrant. Many of the other terms noted earlier (such as exile, expellee, refugee, displaced person, escapee) seem to be related to the notion of *émigré*, but each nevertheless possesses a distinctiveness of its own. The common feature of all these terms seems to be either an inability or unwillingness to become an immigrant, or more specifically a hyphenated American; the distinctions center mostly on the reasons or the means of departure from the homeland.

Let us examine these different terms in turn and reserve the term *émigré* as the collective concept to tie together the discussion. The term *exile* has a very specific meaning and is inevitably tied to a pervasive sense of historical consciousness; further, the *exile* holds a significant role in Hungarian history and this is quite evident in the consciousness of Hungarians wherever they may be in the world. After all, the two major individuals whose statues decorate the square in front of the Hungarian parliament both died as exiles, namely Ferenc Rákóczi II and Lajos Kossuth. Desirous of emulating them, many a Hungarian political leader has chosen exile after the cause he had embodied or supported had failed; for example, many of the soldiers and statesmen of the revolution of 1848–49 chose exile, some in European countries, but quite a number of them in North America and some even gave their names to settlements (as László Ujházy) or perpetuated the memory of Lajos Kossuth. However, all these efforts, while quite impressive at that time, had little if any long lasting impact; the intensity of the historical consciousness was not sustained and the settlements disappeared along with the initial enthusiasm. Many returned to Hungary, some entered the public service of the host countries. Exiles who chose to remain exiles usually had an extensive initial impact, but very seldom managed to institutionalize their cause or presence. The example of another eminent exile, Count Mihály Károlyi, was in many

respects similar, never having a really effective role in the immigrant, as opposed to the emigré community.

Something similar can be said about the expellee; the best known example of this category in our times was the late Cardinal József Mindszenty who attempted, actually quite successfully, to foster a renewed sense of historical consciousness among Hungarians throughout the world. In connection with his situation one must point to a specific feature of historical consciousness, although it could just as readily have been alluded to in other contexts. Quite simply, the image of Cardinal Mindszenty in the historical consciousness of many formerly radical right Hungarians (such as, for example, former Arrow Cross members and supporters) neglected to take note of the opposition of Mindszenty to the Arrow Cross and the radical right program generally; yet these people were among his staunchest supporters here. Even though this situation was noted with chagrin and frustration by Mindszenty himself, it nonetheless underlies the point I wish to make, namely that a historical consciousness does not have to be in accord with even well-known and documented historical facts to be an effective force. Indeed, it almost seems — much to the frustration of historians and scholars generally — that the opposite seems to be more prevalent among many individuals. Among other expellees in recent times, one can list the names of the philosophers Ágnes Heller and Ferenc Fehér and the sociologist Iván Szelényi; however, recent political development in Hungary have altered not only their status and position, but also that of Cardinal Mindszenty; in the latter case, the major square of Esztergom has been renamed in his memory. Just recently, his conviction was declared null and void by the Hungarian government.

The terms refugee and escapee can readily be discussed together. Obviously an individual who departs a country in order to leave behind a possible or potential political difficulty fits into this category, whether he does so as a consequence of a lost war, a failed revolution, or an unbearable political situation. In conjunction with a lost war, in this instance most generally World War II, its antecedents and consequences included, the term displaced person has also been used to refer to those who chose refuge in the face of advancing ideologies and armies. For example, before and during World War II, many Jews left Hungary on account of the spread of Hitlerism to this region of Europe. Immediately after the war, many Hungarians decided to escape the advance of the Soviet army into Hungary; some left on account of fear and reprisal, others because of their intimate association with the dominant elements of the inter-war political system; it is to these that the term displaced person was applied most specifically. Nor must one fail to mention those who were deported or became prisoners of war. These people could well be classified as involuntary displaced persons and also represented a great loss for the country. Still others left Hungary at different times between 1945 and 1949 on account of the threatening nature of the political situation for their lives and fortunes. All of these peoples were in some sense refugees and in spite of the great differences among them in terms of political orientation, they had in common a substantially different, but nonetheless powerful and deeply held historical consciousness, one which accompanied them into exile and formed the basis of their new

life as political refugees. Needless to say, they were successful in maintaining this attitude for many years, often and perhaps inevitably at the price of alienation from American society and in some instances even at the cost of distancing themselves from those immigrants who perceived their historical consciousness or destiny quite differently. Something similar occurred in the case of the refugees of the 1956 revolution and the differentiation among them followed similar patterns. Furthermore, the differentiation of the historical consciousness of the post-1962 refugees, political and economic, has shown a marked decline in the level of commitment to Hungarian historical consciousness and a continued distancing from the immigrant or even emigré communities. Nevertheless, the important issue to remember is that this process was to a great extent shaped by the specific forms of their historical memories, and thus consciousness, of the character and understanding of the revolution of 1956. It remains to be seen what will be the impact of the 1989 political changes in Hungary on the sense of the historical responsibility and concern of the Hungarians outside Hungary. Another dimension of the problem is the passing on of this generally heightened sense of historical consciousness to a subsequent generation, a nearly obsessive concern among Hungarians in North America and elsewhere at the present juncture of life in the emigré and even among some elements of the immigrant community. One should note that the elements of a historical consciousness may be passed on, but it must be internalized by the recipient if it is to have any impact on life. In cases where the recipient (rather subsequent generation) must learn the elements of another historical consciousness than the one which informs one's daily experiences, there can and do occur problems and concerns. Quite simply, it is really very difficult to construct also a Hungarian historical consciousness in an alien land and even if achieved in some form, will be different from the expectations of those who did not have to engage in that process. The difficulties are much too evident, but the rewards even greater.

Three terms noted earlier (settler, resettler, expatriate) remain to be dealt with, but these are not as significant for our present purposes as the others. The first two refer mostly to the movement of peoples across borders freely or for purposes motivated generally by a desire to advance personally or professionally; in this movement issues of historical consciousness are generally not a major consideration.

Something similar could be said about the substantial number of mostly so-called "refugees" who arrived and settled in various parts of North America after the mid-1970's and extending to our own day. The following comments are most directly applicable to them and not as directly to the numerous Hungarians arriving from Transylvania; their emigration is motivated to a much greater extent by a sense of historical and national consciousness. Virtually all those arriving from Hungary were seeking a better economic situation or came more for personal rather than strictly political reasons. Nonetheless the overwhelming majority of them have been received as refugees by Hungarians already here, simply because these previously arrived Hungarians (and Hungarian Americans) saw in them their successors as refugees. Whether the attitude of many of these new arrivals qualifies them as refugees (irregardless of their own self-definition as such) is a tenuous issue at best. Certainly their level of Hungarian his-

torical consciousness is rather minimal; there are, however, exceptions and some may yet have a role in continuing some type of Hungarian presence in North America.

The condition described by the term expatriate in the specific context of Hungarians in the world at this time has only minimal applicability, although given the ongoing political changes, we may well be seeing more expatriates from Hungary. The full consequence of these political changes and the establishment of a democratic Hungary undoubtedly have a vast impact on the historical consciousness of all Hungarians outside Hungary, however defined or self-defined. Certainly the future of very many political emigrés will be altered fundamentally. Indeed, it may be necessary to construct other models for the continued existence of Hungarian culture in North America and elsewhere in the world. Perhaps the example of the life of the Finns in North America may prove more instructive than the life patterns of other emigré and immigrant peoples here. A new category, although not wholly without precedent, will emerge and grow in significance, namely transient foreign resident. The reasons for this should not be sought, except perhaps marginally, in the realm of historical consciousness, but rather in economic and related aspirations. Even these temporary foreign resident Hungarians can nonetheless contribute after their return to Hungary to the improvement of the quality of life there. Then there is also the complex issue of reverse migration to Hungary, but these concerns are beyond our present purposes. A further analysis of these issues should remain for the future and in spite of these prospects we should concentrate upon what is transpiring now.

As we nonetheless, and with a sense of loss, witness the gradual demise (by no means irreversible) of an institutional Hungarian presence in North America — as well as a declining and aging population of Hungarians only partially counter-balanced by new arrivals from Hungary and Transylvania the past ten to fifteen years — one must of necessity think of the corresponding changes (one hesitates to say dissolution) of the historical consciousness which supported it and gave it life. The issue can then be posed as follows: How necessary are these institutions? This in turn only leads to more queries and concerns. The most pressing of these concerns would be the ongoing conflict between those who still perceive of themselves as emigrés — even though the reason for their emigré status has been eliminated with the establishment of Hungary as a democratic state — and those who consider themselves immigrants and ethnic Hungarians.

To place the issue on a more theoretical level let us ask if we can be really compensated by the argument that we are on the verge of a new anthropological plateau in the human condition (as Alexander Solzhenitsyn said in his Harvard commencement speech some years ago and seems to be saying in a different way in his more recent statements on the future of Russia), namely that a change in the quality, scope and depth of our Hungarian consciousness or uniqueness as a people can be fully or even mostly counter-balanced with the rapid decline of an institutional support system. Is it really possible to reduce the conscious Hungarian presence here or elsewhere to a small minority of concerned intellectuals (or negatively speaking, to a remnant of fanatic na-

tionalists) and a large number of people for whom national consciousness has been reduced to its least common denominator? (Need I say what that is.)

These and related questions should be asked now, while there are still those who can argue about these issues and act upon them while still possessing a reasonably comprehensive, open-minded and tolerant Hungarian historical consciousness. These answers are beyond the competence of the historian to discuss, being in the realm of hope and belief, characteristics of life to which we respond — to paraphrase Pascal — not only with our minds, but also with our hearts.

May I conclude, however, with a thought from the Rev. László Tótkés who noted in a sermon delivered sometime in December 1989 in a small Transylvanian village to an audience of long-suffering and simple people, that on some level we Hungarians all belong together, possess a common destiny wherever we may live in the world. I would like to think that for Hungarians at the present juncture of history this sense should be on the level of a common historical consciousness.