

HERITAGE EDUCATION AS A CONCEPTUAL CONTEXT FOR TEACHING HUNGARIAN

GEORGE BISZTRAY

University of Toronto

It would be nice to find a viable definition of "heritage education" somewhere. In a way, this term is a tautology, since any education aims at the perpetuation of the heritage of a culturally defined region or group. More specific is the definition of the term in a multicultural society like Canada where the transmission of the cultural heritage of individual "ethnic" groups is regarded as the primary function of heritage language education.¹ While this definition sets at least one concrete educational goal, it also poses two problems. One is the division of education into a general ("Canadian") and a limited ("ethnic") sphere and all the possible conflicts that implies. On the level of language education, for instance, the participation of a newly arrived young immigrant in the heritage language program is exemplary and considered an asset to the class. At the same time, the difficulty of the immigrant child in public school to communicate in either of the official languages is an obvious disadvantage. The official interpretation, naturally, is that the two spheres "enhance" each other. This structural-functionalist optimism characterizes the whole of multicultural state policy. The realities of life are more conflict-ridden, as we well know.

Another problem stems from the emphasis on teaching language as the criterion for heritage education. It is true that language is the primary means for the transmission of social values. Can we afford, however, to dwell indefinitely on the non-political and measurable field of language teaching without scrutinizing the content of communication and the values that the different languages express? My twelve years at the Hungarian Chair of the University of Toronto and my own irregular contact with the city's Hungarian community schools make me dissatisfied with such an easy proposition. For the purposes of this paper, I will rely mostly on my limited experience, having found no literature to guide me in my inquiry — possibly only available in sporadic publications, if at all.

The simplistic reduction of cultural heritage to language teaching tends to serve Canadian social coherence. In spite of the occasional concerns of the dominant Anglophone North Americans, one can argue that bilingualism is essentially an asset to any society. On the other hand, as soon as we include values, historical consciousness, standards of behaviour and forms of self-expression as well as interaction, among the variables of cultural heritage, we are faced with potential social conflict: between the host country and the group, between the group and other groups, and finally, within the

group itself. It is this latter aspect — the diverging in-group views of heritage — that I wish to centre my discussion around.

N. F. Dreisziger raised the matter of “sub-ethnic identities”, defining a whole new research field thus: “It seems that students of ethnic studies have tended to concentrate on what cultural and societal factors bring individuals together into ethnic groups, at the expense of examining the circumstances that separate their members into clusters of individuals that have distinct identities within a particular ethnic community.”² Beginning with this statement, let us ask: which Hungarian heritage are we teaching in Canada? A few years ago, this question would have been much more polemic, when Hungary was ruled by a communist regime. The brief period under consideration in this article is the 1980s. I do not intend to discuss the current political situation in Hungary, nor do I intend to spell out any program or predictions for the 1990s, except perhaps indirectly by scrutinizing past problems and deficiencies.

The first type of conflict one can identify stems from differences in personal experience. Diachronically, it manifests itself in the distinct diversity of the consciousness of various immigrant waves. In Canada, we have the cultural consciousness of prewar immigrants, DPs, post-revolutionary refugees and the small but steady immigrant accumulation of the past quarter century.³ These shifting indicators strongly influenced education in this country over the intervening years.

Once upon a time there may have been community teachers with strong leftist leanings, but no record can be found of their existence. On the other hand, until recently, the influence of community teachers who came from the ranks of the DPs was more decisive. Their values were perhaps most evident in the teaching of history. Classroom materials found in the archives of the Hungarian Chair offer predictable, but still interesting, insights in support of this observation. No less typical was their literary canon as seen in one reader, published in Toronto in the early 1980s, which was originally intended for the Hungarian Credit High School.⁴ The selection cannot be called tendentious, yet it shows signs of a value system which, at the time of publication, differed from that found in Hungary. Authors are represented here whose names never appeared in the old country’s school readers after World War II: László Mécs, Mrs. Elemér Papp-Váry, Lajos Pósa, Sándor Reményik, Dezső Szabó, Lajos Zilahy — authors of about 15 per cent of the readings. The historical and patriotic element is emphasized at the expense of the socially committed: the three poems by Attila József (*Altató, Mama, Anyám*), included in the reader, make the poet appear as a favourite for Mothers’ Day recitals. In one curious respect, the selection coincides with official Hungarian priorities at the time. It includes very few works by Hungarian authors who lived outside the post-Trianon borders, with the exception of Nyírfő, Reményik and Zilahy.

The ideological context of the personal experience not only has a historical extension, but it also derives from the socio-economic environment of the individual. This can be called the synchronic aspect of the human experience: the one which has moulded the teacher, his personal taste, vocabulary and priorities. Someone born in the Hungarian countryside may still attach values to teaching the meaning of words like

döndöle, pattantyú, sajtár, or the still actively used yet hardly essential *kéve, köcsög, menyecske*. These words appear in Hungarian folk songs and tales reprinted in a textbook published by the Mother Tongue Conference designated for "6–8 year old children abroad".⁵ While folkloristic materials undoubtedly make attractive teaching aids, they also pose serious cultural semantic problems. At the same time, they illustrate the interplay between the diachronic and synchronic aspects, between history and sociology, as the vocabulary of such texts refers to a Hungarian countryside that has changed radically since they were first recorded.

On the other hand, another teacher born in Budapest may assign too much importance to city slang. A recent vocabulary test published in a Western Canadian Hungarian community paper posed a question about the meaning of the word *bájjúnár*. If ever there was a disposable word for Hungarian Canadians, this is it. Interestingly, however, the urban bias is less evident in educational materials than references to a bygone rural lifestyle. Although such speculations lie outside the scope of the present paper, one may still draw revealing conclusions about the origins and value motivations of the teachers in Hungarian Canadian heritage schools (and the educators in Hungary who wrote the schoolbooks intended for export).

Another difference in the personal experiences on the synchronic level stems from the educational background of the teacher and student. It is an old-fashioned axiom, even unpopular and considered reactionary in recent decades, that written expression is the highest form of civilization. (From this axiom the nonsensical jargon of bureaucracy, commerce and several sciences are exempt.) Similar to the public school system, Hungarian community schools tend to overemphasize verbal communication on the elementary and secondary level. As the pedagogical guidelines of a Toronto community school stated a few years ago: "The basis of language is speech. Consequently, thinking in a given language precedes in importance the teaching of grammatical rules."⁶ While this thesis may be correct, the problem is that the development of verbal communication often remains the only pedagogical goal in community schools. It is less demanding than the development of writing skills, and equally convenient for the non-professional weekend teachers and less ambitious pupils. Hence, the abundance of poetic recitals, which are seldom matched by essay competitions. Many university students who have attended community schools take post-secondary Hungarian courses with the expectation of having an opportunity to practice written communication under guidance. In a sense, the community school system has retarded their language development.

As we know, extremes are always binary. At the opposite end of the scale sits the desk-side educator who assumes too much regarding his students. In one of my publications from almost ten years ago, I criticized aesthetically oriented (*lomb, kolomp, dallam, fuvalom*) and overinformative (*államalapító, törökverő*)⁷ language education. The latter, especially, is frequent in Canadian–Hungarian community schools. From history and geography handouts, once used in the Toronto Hungarian Credit High School and now housed in the archives of the Hungarian Chair, we find the innumerable question marks of a frustrated student at words like *ÁVÓ, népbírótság, háztáji*

(spelled with *ly*), *külterjes gazdálkodás* and *nota bene, UNO*. (The student may have queried the meaning of the English acronym appearing in a Hungarian text.)

Clearer than conflicting personal experiences have been the differences in collective values: those of North American immigrants as opposed to those of the Hungarian cultural establishment. All of us remember the Kádárián adage: "Whoever is not against us, is with us", and its version propagated among Hungarians in the West: "We look for whatever ties us together." The result was some unbearably dull readings published in Hungary for use abroad. In these textbooks, the Hungarian diaspora lived in a cultural vacuum, a no-man's land, without any political views or ideological conflicts. Their experiences became tangible and their drab life brightened only when they visited Hungary or enjoyed its cultural exports. In the publication, *Hogy mondjuk helyesen?* (used in our university language courses),⁸ one reading describes a Hungarian family living in Canada. They have come to town from the farm to attend various events in "Hungarian Week". All the dance groups and choirs, the films and the circus, have come from Hungary to give Hungarian Canadians a taste of the "old country". The experience is generalized and the situation one-dimensional: obviously, the author never saw Canada, otherwise he couldn't have remained so impersonal. Neither did he (want to) know about the many Hungarian-Canadian folk ensembles which hold regular festivals of their own. The ideological message is: what would those poor Hungarian Canadians do without the generous cultural export of the Hungarian government?

In the education of the literary tradition, textbooks published in Hungary for diaspora youth differed widely from those used in Hungarian high schools. Tinódi, Balassi, Fazekas, Vörösmarty, Garay, Petőfi, Jókai, Weöres, Illyés, Lőrinc Szabó — who would not approve this selection?⁹ Students in Hungary did receive a more complete education. Besides the above writers, they also studied, at least throughout the 1970s, László Benjámin, József Darvas, Imre Dobozy, Andor Gábor, Frigyes Karikás, Aladár Komját, Béla Illés, to name a few.¹⁰ The double standard is obvious: indoctrination at home, sweet-talk overseas.

One may ask: what did Hungarian cultural policy have to do with heritage education in Canada? As we have seen, the Hungarian communist government targeted emigrant Hungarians and their offspring with vigorous educational and cultural propaganda. Ideological values proposed by the Hungarian establishment for the diaspora did affect this group and, as we know, raised considerable controversy. The "bridgebuilders" and the "national emigration" repeatedly clashed over the usefulness of educational materials published in Hungary.

Considering the total absence of up-to-date information on North American Hungarian community schools and their curricula, it is hardly surprising that the questions raised by the educational practice of the Hungarian heritage schools have no theoretical reflections. Methodological and empirical, maybe,¹¹ but definitely not theoretical. At least one — and, so far, only one — institution that represents community aspirations at the university level has done its best to keep North American Hungarians in-

formed about its educational activity. This institution is the Hungarian Chair of the University of Toronto.

Hungarian university courses in Toronto have a "heritage" character not so much because they are supported by an endowment fund, in part raised by the community, but rather out of necessity. Arguably, there are at least four reasons why Hungarian literature cannot be taught in English (illustrated here by examples from the novel and drama, samples from the readings of two Hungarian courses at the university). First of all, major novels (such as Margit Kaffka's *Színek és évek*, a unique statement of women's place in society) have not yet been translated into English (whereas many insignificant works have already been translated). Second, adequate earlier translations (such as Dezső Kosztolányi's *Édes Anna*, published under the title *Wonder Maid* in London, 1947), are no longer available. Third, existing translations (like that of Gyula Krúdy's *A vörös postakocsi*, under the title *The Crimson Coach*) are qualitatively inadequate to represent the author's true literary genius. Last but not least, we have to face an ethical problem: the eventual selective bias of a haphazard translation market. For some reason, several plays by István Örkény have been translated into English, while the works of other, equally representative and outstanding modern Hungarian playwrights (such as Illyés and Németh, Endre Illés and Sarkadi, Csurka and Szakonyi or Sütő), are still unavailable. Should we teach the plays of Örkény in a drama course offering readings in English, giving the impression that he was the only modern Hungarian playwright worth studying?

(In parentheses: one may argue that Hungarian poetry is better represented in English translation. Quantitatively this is true, but not qualitatively. Besides: is it fair to base a whole introduction to Hungarian literature on poetry alone — and these poems in translation?)

As a consequence, the prerequisite for Hungarian literary courses is a reading knowledge of the language. It is impossible to say how many students who cannot satisfy this prerequisite are lost to our statistics. Those who can read the language and have the necessary motivation, however, receive a much more gratifying education.

Why do these students take Hungarian courses in the first place? Precisely because they want to receive a true "heritage education": a curriculum reflecting the specifics of the Hungarian cultural tradition. When I visited several Hungarian chairs in Italy in the spring of 1987, I realized that most of us in Canada work in an educational setting which differs greatly from that of our Italian colleagues. In a nation-state, cultural analogies are emphasized: Hungarian literature is represented in its interplay with the major currents of European literature and, above all, the literature of the respective country. Because of the language barrier, literary courses in translation are frequent (in Italy they are almost exclusively so); only specialized students do meticulous, language-oriented readings in the original. On the other hand, my Hungarian-Canadian students want to know why their literary heritage is different from the European mainstream. As one student said, "If we wanted to learn only about avantgarde prose, we could take courses on Joyce and Virginia Woolf, on Robbe-Grillet, Sarraute and that crowd." Indeed, I am unable to provide them with examples of current Hungarian experimen-

tal prose to read. My timid attempts in this direction have all failed. Some of these writers could be included in a more traditional, "non-heritage" curriculum, though. On the other hand, in my one-year novel course and one-semester drama course, students easily read eight to ten complete works in the original with full comprehension of the language and its subtle nuances.

The concept of university level heritage education is advocated not only by the Toronto Hungarian Chair. I have been informed by colleagues in the Slavic and two romance language departments (Italian and Spanish-Portuguese) that the number of their students who come from their respective ethnic groups was equally high, occasionally even surpassing the estimated 70 per cent participation by Hungarian Canadians in the Hungarian courses. As my experience has proven, this phenomenon: that university education in various languages and cultures predominantly serves the interests of different communities in heritage maintenance, characterizes at least the major central and western provincial universities as well. Only a careful statistical comparison with a representative selection of American universities could determine whether a predominantly heritage-oriented education at the university level, at least in some cultural traditions, is a uniquely Canadian experience. (At some American universities there is also considerable community input — perceivable, for instance, in the teaching of Scandinavian languages and cultures at the universities of Minnesota and Wisconsin, in particular.)

One can surmise that the practice of heritage teaching does little else than re-emphasize pedestrianized values which are often mistakenly regarded as national characteristics. Shadows of conservatism, even chauvinism, are not far removed. As in everything, this kind of education can also be distorted, but it doesn't have to be. Besides, there are not only historical values but also moral, social and aesthetic ones which are more "Hungarian" than others, although perhaps not uniquely so. Some of these may not, as yet, be recognized. Heritage education is thus a continuing process of discovery. Besides, it provides the students with general information that they can utilize in other courses. A survey of European literary and artistic movements, glossaries of basic linguistic, stylistic, or poetic terminology, prove to the students that their Hungarian education is an organic part of their overall university education. In other words, the mutual enhancement of mainstream and heritage education can be practised positively.

The most nagging of our educational problems can be formulated in the following dilemma. On the one hand, we are still uncertain about what aspects of Hungarian heritage should guide curricula at different levels of education. On the other hand, there is a genuine demand for heritage-oriented schooling. After initial satisfaction with acquiring acceptable communication skills, students (aged ten and above) want to learn about their ancestral culture. Increasingly, they insist on moving beyond clichés and discussing controversial issues. Perhaps the easiest stage at which to satisfy their expectation for greater intellectual intake and critical inquiry is the university level. More difficult is the assessing of their expectations at lower levels. Authoritative deductivism can set educational work off balance, and back by years. It hurts as much as incompetence, and their combination is near fatal.

Obviously, the concept of heritage education is much wider and richer, but also more elusive, than its official Canadian definition. Nevertheless, its practice is here to stay. It has been in operation for some time with varying degrees of success. The question is, whether more exchange of ideas about the concept would help to coordinate educational activities and make them more efficient — a daunting task. Whether North American educators of the Hungarian heritage are up to the challenge is something that remains to be seen. For the time being, we lack even a current directory of community schools where Hungarian is presently being taught. For that matter, we have no university directory either. We should not pamper any vain illusion that we really know our Hungarian heritage, that it is fully shared by all of us, or, that we could not be more dynamic in transmitting it to the younger generation, while still being aware of its contradictions.

Notes

1. Cf. throughout *Heritage Languages in Canada: Research Perspectives. Report of the Heritage Language Conference, convened by the Multiculturalism Directorate, Ottawa, May 1984*, ed. Jim Cummins. 2 vols. (Ottawa, Secretary of State Multiculturalism, 1985).
2. Cf. his paper published in this volume.
3. Cf. esp. N. F. Dreisziger, *Struggle and Hope* (Toronto, McLelland and Stewart Ltd., 1982), pp. 94–232.
4. *Magyar irodalom: versek és elbeszélések* (Toronto, Hungarian Helicon Committee, n. d.)
5. *Tarka lepke: képes magyar nyelvkönyv külföldön élő 6–8 éves gyermekek részére*, 2nd ed. (Budapest, Tankönyvkiadó, 1977).
6. In the archives of the Hungarian Chair of the University of Toronto, file “Education”.
7. *Tematikai és kulturális szempontok a magyar nyelv és irodalom oktatásában*, A IV. Anyanyelvi Konferencia tanácskozásainak összefoglalása (Budapest, Anyanyelvi Konferencia, 1981), pp. 305–9.
8. *Hogy mondjuk helyesen?* (Budapest, Tankönyvkiadó, n. d.), pp. 49–50.
9. Selected from the textbook series of the Mother Tongue Conference, *Tarka lepke* (1977), *Magyar szavak világa* (1975), *Beszéljünk magyarul!* (1979).
10. *Szöveggyűjtemény a XX. század magyar irodalmából a középiskolák IV. osztálya számára* (Budapest, Tankönyvkiadó, 1973), 5th ed.
11. Cf. e.g. such conference papers as Marg Csapó, “Issues and Concerns Related to Teaching Hungarian in Canada”, American Hungarian Educators’ Association 8th annual conference Toronto 1983; Ildikó Kovács, “Olvasói szokások a torontói magyar diákság körében”, University of Toronto Triennial Hungarian Studies Conference 1989; Eva Tomory, “Motivations for Taking Hungarian Language at the University Level”, Hungarian Studies Association of Canada 6th Annual Conference Victoria 1990.