

**THE VERHOVAY FRATERNAL ASSOCIATION'S
EFFORTS TO PERPETUATE HUNGARIAN
CONSCIOUSNESS AMONG ITS NATIVE-BORN MEMBERS
(1930s–1950s)**

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American–Hungarian connections have very old roots. According to some experts, these roots reach back to the time of King St. Stephen (997/1000–1038) when a certain alleged Hungarian by the name of Tyrker accompanied Leif Erikson to the shores of North America. Others regard this claim as untenable and point to the late-16th-century Stephen Parmenius of Buda (ca. 1550–1583) as the first authentic Hungarian on the North American continent.

In the two and a half centuries following Parmenius, very few Hungarians attempted to visit the new continent. Those who did were mostly religious missionaries, romantic dreamers, and soldiers-of-fortune. Whatever their motivation, most of these visitors contributed something to the American dream.

The first relatively large-scale Hungarian emigration took place after the Hungarian Revolution of 1848–1849, when — in conjunction with those who came during the 1850s — perhaps as many as 4 000 political emigrés ended up in the United States. But these political emigrés did not come with the intention of staying — as did most of the other nationalities who preceded them in the previous two centuries. They only came to escape political persecution following Hungary's defeat. They also wished to return to Hungary at the first opportune moment.

Quite different in nature was the mass immigration in the period between 1880 and 1914, which transferred nearly two million Hungarian citizens, among them about 650 000 to 700 000 Magyars, to the United States. The members of this turn-of-the-century mass immigration were motivated almost exclusively by economic considerations. But similarly to the Forty-Eighters, initially these economic immigrants also regarded themselves as temporary residents of the New World.

During the first phase of their immigration, this group consisted largely of young males who came with the intention of collecting funds for a better life back in Hungary. They were representatives of the peasant classes (from smallholders to landless peasantry), but their ranks also included a significant number of small-town artisans and semi-skilled workers. The majority of the latter were only slightly removed from the way of life and mentality of the peasants, and for this reason they did fit into this peasant immigration. Whatever their background, however, most of these immigrants ended up as unskilled or semi-skilled workers in Northeastern United States.

These economic immigrants were totally unprepared for conditions that awaited

them in the New World. They were certainly unprepared to confront American society as equal partners. In addition to their lack of English and relative low level of literacy, they also represented a social and cultural world that appeared rather primitive to contemporary Americans. For this reason the immigrants were pushed into occupations and working conditions that most native Americans were unwilling to assume. They thus became the exploited helots of turn-of-the-century America. They were used as the necessary cheap labor to fuel the engines of the ever-expanding American industrial establishment.

Their lives in the mines, steel mills, immigrant ghettos, and boarding houses of Pennsylvania, West Virginia, and Ohio were close to inhuman. Because of the frequency of industrial accidents, their way of existence demanded an almost daily toll in human lives. In some ways their lives may even have been worse than back in Hungary's contemporary class society. They tolerated these conditions simply because they had no other options. They tolerated them because back home opportunities for a better future were even more limited. And they tolerated them because they viewed their living and working conditions in America as temporary, which is to be followed by a much better and brighter future back in Hungary.

In the midst of these inhuman conditions only the nearness of their fellow immigrants, who spoke the same language and subscribed to the same set of values, made their lives tolerable. This nearness and mutual need soon produced a system of self-help institutions. The most significant of these institutions were the religious congregations, the newspapers, and the fraternal societies. Congregations became centers of Hungarian religious and cultural life, newspapers emerged as the voices of survival, and fraternal societies became bastions of security. But these three institutional networks also became the repositories and heralds of Hungarian national consciousness. They fostered the immigrants' desire to survive as a nationality and their faithfulness to the mother country.

Naturally, the expression of this Hungarian national consciousness adjusted itself to the cultural level and needs of the immigrants; and this was true even in the case newspapers and institutions that were edited or lead by highly educated intellectuals. Thus, similarly to the people of rural Hungary, the immigrant masses also drew their inspiration from the Revolution of 1848. Their national consciousness was sustained by an over-simplified version of the Revolution's Kossuthist traditions and by an over-simplified anti-Habsburgism. For this reason, the centerpieces of Hungarian national traditions in America were the celebrations associated with March 15th (start of the revolution) and October 6th (execution of thirteen Hungarian revolutionary generals). These celebrations included dressing up in the national colors, making emotional speeches about "unparalleled Hungarian heroism" and "unmatched Habsburg treachery", and then — while eating, drinking, and living it up — shedding a few tears about the undeserved misfortunes of the nation. But these get-togethers also included repeated calls for the retention of the Hungarian language and identity among the second generation.

The efforts to counteract the de-nationalizing influences of American society occurred in three distinct steps, culminating in the years immediately preceding World

War II. It did have some success, but its efforts to perpetuate the Hungarian language among the native-born generations was doomed to failure. Although the first American-born generation still spoke some Hungarian, this fluency was on such a low level that even if married within the ethnic group, its members were unable to pass on this knowledge to their own children. Consequently, by the 1950s — notwithstanding the unexpected coming of the post-World War II political immigrants [Displaced Persons or DPs] — most of the Hungarian-American institutions, and even some of the newspapers switched over to English, or to a kind of bilingualism in which Hungarian came to occupy a secondary position to English. (Naturally, this was not true for the organizations and newspapers founded by the new political immigrants. But the Old Timers and their descendants had very few contacts with the DPs, their associations and newspapers.)

Although the turn-of-the-century immigrants eventually lost their battle for the perpetuation of the Hungarian language, they did not fail completely in instilling some national consciousness into their offspring. This consciousness, however, was only a pale copy of the original brought along by their elders. Moreover, it came to be expressed increasingly in English, or at best in a simple and broken Hungarian.

To illustrate the course and outcome of this struggle, let me briefly summarize the relevant efforts of the largest Hungarian-American fraternal association, the former Verhovay or the current William Penn Association. I shall do this on the basis of my brief history of that Association, which I prepared at the request of its president on the occasion of its centennial in 1986. I might add though that because of certain internal conflicts within the Association — which during the past ten years resulted the rise and fall of five national presidents — this centennial work is still unpublished today.

The Verhovay Fraternal Association

According to the so-called “Verhovay-Legend” perpetuated in most early publications, the Verhovay Fraternal Association was founded in February 1886 by thirteen Hungarian miners in the Central Pennsylvanian mining town of Hazleton. The Association’s founding president was a certain Mihály Pálinkás (d. 1942) who occupies a prominent place in this founding legend and in its early history. Pálinkás had an impressive presence, and he appears to have embodied the best and the worst features of the turn-of-the-century economic immigrants. He represented the immigrants’ determination to survive as Hungarians in the inhospitable world of late-19th-century industrial America. At the same time, he also projected a kind of ostentatious peasant nationalism and provocative personal presence that often lead to unwanted confrontations both within and without the Hungarian-American community.

For about three decades after its foundation, the Verhovay was only one of a multitude of similar fraternal associations established during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The goal of these associations was to satisfy the most elemental needs of the immigrants. They were designed to assume the traditional welfare and self-help

role of the Hungarian village, missing in the United States even for most native-born. In that age American society lacked even the most elemental features of welfare legislation, and the scorned immigrants could die and not even receive a decent burial. Nor would they receive any help in case of sickness or physical mutilation.

For the sake of interest, and because this also reflects upon the mentality of the immigrants, it should also be mentioned here that the Verhovay Association, this most successful of the Hungarian fraternal associations in America, was named after Gyula Verhovay (1849–1906), a well-known political demagogue, and one of the founders of anti-Semitic movement in late-19th-century Hungary. But this fact reflects more upon the naiveté of the immigrants' nationalism, than upon their alleged or real anti-Semitism. As a matter of fact, their being captivated by Verhovay was due less to their appreciation of his ideas, than to their above-mentioned anti-Habsburgism and their powerful dread of the urban classes. At one point, their dislike of the educated classes reached a level where they even incorporated this into their by-laws by specifically stating that no "learned gentleman" could ever be an elected leader of their association.

The Verhovay Fraternal Association's centennial history can be divided into three main epochs: (1) the four decades between 1886 and 1926, which saw the rise of the association into the ranks of a few competing national fraternal; (2) the three decades between 1926 and 1955, which witnessed an intensive rivalry among the top four Hungarian fraternal, ending with the ultimate triumph of the Verhovay; and finally (3) the three decades between 1955 and 1986, which saw the Association's near-complete Americanization. Although the last few decades also saw an occasional outburst of renewed Hungarian consciousness, none of them called for the restitution of the Hungarian language, nor for the re-establishment of a meaningful Hungarian consciousness. Given the limited linguistic competence of the Association's membership, however, both of these goals would have been totally unrealistic.

In light of the above, the struggle for the Hungarian language and national consciousness was of necessity limited to the second epoch of Verhovay's history.

In order to follow the story of this struggle, we have to re-emphasize once more that up to the end of World War I the majority of the Hungarian immigrants regarded themselves as temporary "guest workers" [*Gastarbeiter*] in America. Their original goal was to return to Hungary and to use their American savings to lift themselves out of a life of poverty and humiliation.

Most of the immigrants were never able to fulfill this goal. Partially because after having lived for several years in a less-structured society, it became almost impossible for them to readjust to the requirements of Hungary's extremely polarized class society; partially because after having established roots and families in the United States, their American-born children kept them here; and partially because by the time some of them have reached the desired level of material well-being, they were prevented from repatriating by the fact that their homelands were no longer part of Hungary. This fact, by the way, also explains the reason why the Trianon question became such an important issue among the immigrants.

Austria-Hungary's dismemberment, Hungary's truncation, and small rump Hun-

gary's economic plight following World War I ended all thoughts of repatriation. Hungarian-Americans were now free to turn their attention the making their stay permanent and of making sure that their American-born children would retain the language and culture of their forefathers. Naturally, the immigrants were fully aware that they themselves could never become true Americans. Not so their native-born children, who started out as Hungarians, grew up in a bilingual and bi-cultural world, and then ended up as hyphenated Americans. Although primarily English-speaking, their status in America's WASP society was still very tenuous. They were never accepted as full-fledged Americans, and were forced to live the life of a so-called "marginal man". The Anglo-Saxon Americans' off-handed attitude toward the immigrants' language, culture, society, and way of life lay heavily on their native-born children, and this rejection pushed them even more rapidly toward Americanization.

During the first five to six years of their lives, when they were still confined to their families and their ethnic ghettos, the immigrants' native-born offspring spoke and acted like their parents. After reaching school age and confronting American society, however, they suddenly began to be ashamed of their roots. They detested their parents' lowly social status and inability to speak an acceptable English. For this reason, after enrolling in American schools, these children often refused to identify themselves as Hungarians, and also increasingly declined to speak Hungarian with their parents. They were ashamed of their parents' simple peasant ways, which did not seem to fit into urbanized American society. Thus, by the time they reached teenage, they consciously shed their Hungarian image and language. At times they even tried to distance themselves from Hungarian organizations.

By the 1930s this phenomenon had reached a point where the aging members of the immigrant generation were beginning to be worried about their own future well-being. They were afraid for their institutions (churches and associations); they were pained by the progressive alienation of their children; and they were afraid that if this process of denationalization would continue, the whole infrastructure of Hungarian-American life would collapse. They would remain there in their old age without the support of Hungarian-American churches, fraternal associations, and other cultural organizations.

These were the conditions that compelled the spokesmen of Hungarian-American communities to redouble their efforts to retain their children for themselves and for the Hungarian-American community. The solutions proposed and accepted by these leaders consisted of the following: On the one hand, they grudgingly accepted that their native-born children were already more American than Hungarian who functioned primarily in English, and that Hungarian-American organizations would also have to adjusted themselves to the needs of this English-speaking generation. On the other hand, they initiated a comprehensive information campaign to instruct their children in the history, achievements, and merits of the Hungarian nation. They wanted to eradicate from their children's mind all inferiority complexes. They wanted to make the second generation proud of their Hungarian heritage, so that they would want to be part of that heritage.

This movement to save the young generation also became part of the goals and activities of the Verhovay Association. Initiated during the late 1920s, this undertaking reached its climax ten years later at the time of the outbreak of World War II. The leaders of the Verhovay first began by establishing of a series of English-speaking branches, which were placed under the direction of an elected English-speaking branch president. In 1934 they founded the *Verhovay Journal*, which was the English version of the much older *Verhovayak Lapja*. And by 1939 the English-speaking branches were given an official representation in the national leadership via a new associate president. In 1947 a new regulation obliged the English-speaking branches to represent themselves at national congresses by native-born delegates. And in 1948 the national congress officially introduced bilingualism. Following this decision, the use of Hungarian progressively declined both in national congresses as well as in the central office. By the mid-1950s official bilingualism turned into *de facto* English monolingualism.

The final step in this Americanization process came in 1955, when the Verhovay absorbed the Rákóczi Association, and then re-emerged under the name of William Penn Fraternal Association. Exchanging its original Hungarian name for that of a prominent American was the last straw in the Verhovay's rapid progress toward Americanization.

The gradual and apparently unavoidable triumph of the English language was paralleled in the history of the Verhovay Association by increased efforts to strengthen the young generation's Hungarian consciousness. The goal was to eradicate all feelings of inferiority so that they would want to remain Hungarian. To achieve this goal, the Verhovay's leaders created many opportunities to permit their children and grandchildren to learn about their heritage. They urged their chapters to establish scout troops and sports teams, to sponsor Hungarian language courses and summer camps, and to support weekend schools and radio programs.

The Verhovay's national leadership went even further. They also undertook to support college programs in Hungarian studies, and to subsidize some of their members' efforts to send their children to Hungarian secondary schools and colleges. At the same time they also subsidized the publication of Hungarian handbooks and grammar books geared to the American-born generation, and during World War II they commissioned the writing of so-called "letter writing books". These were essential because very few of the American-born enlisted men were able to write in Hungarian, at the same time when few of their parents were literate in English. Thus, the only way they could communicate with each other was in a simple Hungarian, aided by these "letter writing books". These handbooks contained several dozen short letters which could be used by the soldiers as models to convey simple messages to their parents and older relatives.

During the 1930s, the Verhovay Association also initiated public discussion on the questions of bilingualism, dual loyalty, and the desirability to retain one's Hungarian heritage. These questions were debated on the pages of the Hungarian-American press, including the two dailies, the Cleveland-based *Szabadság* [Liberty] and the New York-based *Amerikai Magyar Népszava* [American Hungarian People's Voice]. But the re-

flections of these debates can also be found in various Verhovay publications, including the *Golden Jubilee Book* of 1936, where a number of prominent spokesmen of the Hungarian community expressed their views on this issue. They included Joseph Daragó, the Association's president, as well as prominent literary critic Professor Joseph Reményi. But the resonance of this important issue also reached the 1938 Second Hungarian World Congress in Budapest, where Hungarian-American delegates openly discussed the problems they faced in their efforts to retain the second generation.

President Joseph Daragó played an especially significant role in this effort within the Verhovay Association. The gifted, energetic, but mostly self-educated Daragó was realistic enough to conclude that there is really very little hope for the retention of the native-born generations for the Hungarian cause without permitting the English language to take precedence over Hungarian. This was also one of his compelling reasons for resigning from the presidency in 1943. He wished to pass on the leadership of the Association in an orderly fashion into the hands of the second generation.

Parallel with these efforts to preserve at least the Hungarian consciousness, if not the Hungarian language, of the native-born generation, the Verhovay Association and its numerous local branches also undertook the establishment of various sport teams, including baseball, golf, and bowling teams. The purpose of these teams was to enhance the feeling of belonging among the members of the Association. Most of them functioned in connection with the so-called "Verhovay Homes" or "Hungarian Houses" that were being established during those years. By the 1940s, the Verhovay Association also organized regional and national competitions among these teams, which meets served as forums for promoting the idea of Hungarian ethnicity and Hungarian national consciousness among the native-born. As a result of these multifaceted activities, between the late 1920s and the mid-1950s, these Verhovay Homes or Hungarian Houses became the most important centers of Hungarian-American cultural and political life in America — especially as these activities related to the Old Timers and their descendants.

In general this does not hold true for the post-World War II political emigrés, who arrived during the early 1950s and who immediately established their own institutional infrastructure completely separate from that of the Old Timers.

The Verhovay Association's struggle for the retention and perpetuation of Hungarian consciousness in the United States is intimately linked with the Hungarian-Americans' fight against the unjust terms of the Treaty of Trianon (June 4, 1920). But this struggle, which was waged with varying intensity through the 1920s and 1930s, placed the Hungarian-Americans into a very uncomfortable position immediately upon the outbreak of World War II. As Hungarians they were naturally supportive of and overjoyed by the partial revision of the Hungarian frontiers in the course of 1938 to 1941 — even though these just revisions were achieved with the help of Italy and Germany. But as Americans they had to reject Nazism, as well as Hungary's formal if uncomfortable alliance with Hitler's Germany. This issue became especially critical after Pearl Harbor, when Germany and the United States became formal adversaries at the time when Hungary was fighting on Germany's side. As Americans they were now ob-

liged to support American and Allied war efforts, but as Hungarians they had to speak up for Hungary. At the same time, they still had to continue nurturing the Hungarian consciousness in their children and grandchildren.

In this difficult situation the Verhovay Association had no other alternative except to follow the basic policy of the American Hungarian Federation, which was to try to make a distinction between the Hungarian nation, on the one hand, and the Hungarian Government and its policies, on the other. Thus, while the Verhovay-leadership emphasized the Association's faithfulness to the United States and its support of America's war efforts, it also repeatedly pointed out that Hungary's alliance with Nazi Germany was simply the result of its government's fateful decision, made under the duress and under the impact of an unjust treaty which resulted in Historic Hungary's dismemberment.

At this stage in our discussion it is perhaps useful to point out that the policy followed by the Verhovay was basically identical with the policy of most of the major Hungarian-American organizations. These included the American Hungarian Federation [AHF], which was the oldest Hungarian umbrella organization founded in 1906, as well as the Free Hungarian Committee, that was founded by the exile politician Tibor Eckhart in 1941. It was actually the AHF that was responsible for working out this policy in 1939 when the United States was not yet involved in the war. But the leaders of the Verhovay also had a significant role in the AHF's leadership.

This policy of distinguishing between the Hungarian nation and its government had very little impact upon official American attitude toward Hungary either during or after the war. At the same time it did make the Association's relationship to its younger members more manageable. Moreover, it also permitted the Verhovay to continue its efforts to perpetuate Hungarian national consciousness among its younger members even while the United States was still officially at war with their mother country.

The decade of the 1950s created a totally new situation both for the Verhovay and for Hungarian-Americans in general. On the one hand, the influx of the new political immigrants — including the DPs and the Fifty-Sixers — transformed Hungarian-America into a much more complex, varied, and politically more sophisticated community; on the other hand, with the aging and dying out of the old immigrant generation, the leadership of the traditional organizations rapidly fell under the control of the native-born. Shorn of the presence of their Hungarian-born elders — while retaining some elements of simplified Hungarian consciousness — the native-born rapidly transformed their associations into English-speaking American organizations.

This is what happened also to the Verhovay Association. In 1955 Verhovay Association absorbed its main rival, the Rákóczi Aid Association. Then, in line with the Americanization trend of those years, it renamed itself the William Penn Fraternal Association. But by discarding two well-known Hungarian names, the restructured organization also altered its self- and public image. Its new leaders appeared to have little desire to continue the struggle for the perpetuation of Hungarian consciousness in the traditional form. Moreover, even if they had this desire, their own limited knowledge prevented them from doing so. Consequently, the task of perpetuating Hungarian lan-

over to the DPs — and to a lesser degree the Fifty-Sixers — who naturally cultivated these traditions on a different level than did the Old Timers and their late descendants.

Following the “great merger”, the leaders of the Verhovay–William Penn continued to pay lip service to the need for Hungarian consciousness, but it is indicative of the great changes that even this lip-service was now done mostly in English. The major issues that used to motivate their elders (Hungarian language, Trianon, Hungary’s position in the World, etc.) were simply too remote from them to interest them. They neither understood, nor cared for such esoteric problems. Thus, their manifestation of Hungarian consciousness came to be limited to the cultivation of a few village traditions, altered by American influences. They practiced and practice these at their social gatherings, but they are too American now to appreciate the problems of Hungary, or to know the meaning of true Hungarian consciousness.

It is an irony of history, that the same period which sees the decline of Hungarian consciousness in America, also witnessed the destruction of true Hungarian consciousness at home; much of it having been destroyed by the failed socialist-communist experimentations of the past four decades.

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