

MAGYAR LIFE IN THE DANUBE BASIN

BY

LOUIS KARPATY

The various special sciences studying questions of detail — e.g. comparative literature, linguistics and comparative ethnography — have in their development proved more and more definitely that *the Magyars, apart from having during the course of the centuries created the political organization of Central Europe, for a thousand years preserved for the benefit of the peoples living in symbiosis with them a higher form of life.* The hostile — primarily Czech — propaganda which was at work during the first Great War attempted to simplify the question, suggesting that the dismemberment of Hungary subsequently effected under the Treaty of Trianon involved merely the disruption of an artificial structure. This propaganda either failed to understand or deliberately suppressed the fact that *the peoples of Hungary had been living, not merely in the community of an artificial political structure, but in a symbiosis far more deeply rooted which involved a complete community of life.* The various auxiliary sciences are now engaged in revealing the substance of this common form of life. The results achieved comprise a grave indictment of the adjustment effected by the Paris treaties of peace in Central Europe.

First mention is due to the results obtained by Hungarian ethnographical researches. These results must be appraised and their importance gauged as showing each in its particular field that Hungary in the past formed a balanced framework ensuring the everyday subsistence of the several peoples concerned. The first — and the most surprising — phenomenon

revealed is that within the framework of the country the several peoples enjoyed complete liberty of movement, the consequence being that the Slav world found its way into the Magyar basin. Southern Slav, Slovak and Ruthenian wanderers — as we know from ancient traditions — entered Traus-Danubia and the Hungarian Lowlands in order to carry on their trade or find work. The Croats of the "Muraköz" region, for instance, penetrated with their linen goods as far as Nagykanizsa. The Vends of Zala County and the Lutheran "Goritchanetz" people of Vas County undertook work as harvesters on the farms of Magyars in Somogy County. Croatian women from Verőce County crossed the frontier, bartering hemp hurds for chestnuts, onions, plums and bacon.

The situation in the northern part of the country was the same. The severe climate and barren soil of Árva and Trencsén Counties continuously drove the Slovak inhabitants to far-distant territories with all kinds of products of cottage industry. The Slovaks of Árva County wove good linen from the flax of Árva and carried their products all over the country. Cambric-makers from Árva County penetrated as far as Moldavia, Wallachia and even Serbia, — and indeed as far afield as the Crimea —. Large quantities of shingles, planks, wooden utensils were rafted down the Vág to the Danube and beyond from Zólyom, Gömör, Bars and Nógrád Counties. The Slovaks of Árva County wandered all over the country with supplies of the far-famed Árva gin, of the oil pressed out of the twigs of a local species of pine-tree, and of tinder. Slovak scythemen, butter and cheese dealers, itinerant glaziers, tinkers, — Slovaks selling sacred images, cartgrease and wax, baskets and rakes and pottery, — Slovak pig, horse and ass dealers —, were all familiar figures in the days prior to the first Great War all over the country. They not only sold their goods for money, but bartered them also for corn and bacon. In the autumn — before the period of

pig-killing — the country was flooded with saffron-selling Slovaks, who, in addition to saffron, sold majoram, pepper, cummin seeds und other spices needed in the curing of pork, — or bartered these articles in exchange for bacon. But the country was invaded at the same time by other traders too — lace and comb sellers and linen sellers, the latter hawking the Silesian linen printed at Besztercebánya all over Hungary. From Turóc County came the oil-traders. Early in the eighteenth century these latter traded only in oil; but later on they were already "quacking" the country from one end to the other with all kinds of "patent medicins". Hat-dealers from the environs of Besztercebánya took Radvány hats with them to the Banate, to Sebria and even Moldavia.

Ruthenians too flooded the country with their wares. Harvesters from Sub-Carpathia are recorded as having visited the Lowlands as early as the middle of the seventeenth century. Early in the nineteenth century the Hungarian Lowlands were providing "Polacks" from Galicia too with means of earning a livelihood. In the winter Ruthenian women came down to the Lowlands in search of flax, offering walnuts and dried plums in exchange. The Ruthenians of Máramaros County went all over the country collecting the disused boots of the peasants, from which they made mocassins for home use. Ruthenians supplied the Lowlands also with all kinds of wooden articles, cart-grease, firewood and plaited baskets.

The Slav wanderers, workers and popular traders or hawkers appearing in the Magyar ethnic areas not only denoted a simple economic connection. They all alike were welcomed as guests by the Magyar peasantry. The linen-selling Slovaks who visited Békés County, for instance, every year put up at the same places in the villages where they traded. The Slovak harvesters who worked on the shores of the Garam, after finishing their work, were sent home with all kinds of presents in addition to their earnings. Year in

year out the Magyar housewives gave them presents of so-called "haviest cakes". And the harvesters returned for the vintage; and that meant that the Magyar farmers were on friendly terms with them. At such times there was no longer any serious work, only carousals and feasting and jollification. The extent to which the life of the peoples was a genuine symbiosis, may be concluded best from the relevant popular legends. Some of the itinerant Slovak hawkers and traders became familiar figures in the popular imagination of the Magyars. The inhabitants of the Magyar villages of the Hungarian Lowlands still tell stories of Slovak wanderers who used spells to produce rain and who cured all kinds of diseases; while among the Slovak hills of Trencsén, Árva and Turóc Counties the free, happy life of bygone days has been glorified with the halo of legend.

Ethnography has revealed innumerable connections of the kind. These connections are evidence of the existence of a complete and balanced symbiosis within the territory between the Carpathians and the Danube. But other facts too are proved by these earnest traditions of this symbiosis of peoples. For they show that *there can be no alteration of the adjustment of the Danubian living-space except by such as have made themselves familiar with the substance of this ancient symbiotic form of life and have learned its lessons. It is only at the cost of annihilating them that peoples can be wrested from traditions of a thousand years and forced into artificial structures. In the development of nations too there are laws governing the evolution of life — laws founded on traditions and on centuries of popular experience. These laws must be observed. And a judicious policy cannot have any other object than to see that these laws are obeyed.*