

Introduction

by *George Biztray*

Hungarian studies have made significant progress in North America in the past two decades. There has been an impressive output of papers, dissertations, anthologies and monographs. Unfortunately, no one has undertaken a systematic examination of this mass of scholarship with the purpose of ascertaining trends, evaluating methods, outlining problems and suggesting guidelines for the future. Nor has this field of inquiry been adequately defined by scholars in North America or elsewhere. Should a suitable definition be arrived at in the future, it will probably emphasize first of all the interdisciplinary, secondly the cross-cultural character of Hungarian studies. Obviously, Hungarian data can be analyzed in the context of the traditional disciplines. But this approach, which still has its advocates, is based on the rigid division of scholarship into disciplines, as if biologists and chemists, historians and engineers, linguists and medical doctors had nothing to do with each other! The result of such stubborn compartmentalization of academic inquiry have been condescending "I-know-better" attitudes in scholarly criticism, and departmental jealousies at universities. The establishment of interdisciplinary "area studies," especially at American universities in the 1950s and 1960s, has successfully challenged disciplinary overspecialization. It has provided further proof that linguists, art historians, film specialists, geographers, political scientists, medical doctors and people of diverse specializations can share interest in particular areas of the world such as Eastern Europe, Scandinavia or South America. Such interest and preoccupation crosses the vertical barriers of the disciplines horizontally.

Any adequate definition of Hungarian studies will have to acknowledge that this field of scholarly inquiry deals with a small, and in many respects, quite isolated part of world civilization. Because of the uniqueness of Hungarian culture, Hungarian studies cannot conveniently be integrated into other "area" or interdisciplinary studies. Attaching them to Finno-Ugrics is an artificial proposition which makes little sense except

in the fields of linguistics, cultural anthropology, and perhaps folklore. Discussing Hungary as a “communist” country may make sense for economists or political scientists, but hardly anyone else. It is even difficult to put under the same lid the blooming present-day Hungarian arts and literature with the sad aridity of the same spheres of creation in some other socialist countries.

Undoubtedly, Hungarian studies are an interdisciplinary as well as a cross-cultural field of inquiry. Throughout history, Hungarians have interacted with their neighbours and with other peoples. Consequently, in the study of Hungarian culture, the influence on Hungary of her neighbors, as well as that of other nations, cannot be neglected. But there is still another reason why Hungarian studies ought to be cross-culturally oriented. Today, one-third of Hungarians live outside of the political unit called the Hungarian People’s Republic. The fact that about one million people of Hungarian background live in North America today, is a compelling reminder that the discussion of Hungarian phenomena without constant reference to and comparison with the rest of the world would be an irrelevant exercise.

The study of Hungarian culture in North America is an even more obviously cross-cultural undertaking. On the one hand, it is a part of Hungarian studies inasmuch as language, traditions and values brought from the Old Country cannot be understood without a knowledge of Hungarian culture. On the other hand, it is also an integral part of Canadian or American studies. That these two fields of inquiry also struggle with definitional difficulties and an insufficient awareness of their scope, is clearly demonstrated by the fact that Canadian or American studies experts tend to relegate the examination of immigrant minorities to “ethnic studies” specialists. Yet, studying Hungarian, Polish, Ukrainian, Japanese, or other similar elements of Canadian or American society and culture is no more an “ethnic study” than scrutinizing the English, Scottish or Welsh component. Ethnic studies, then, is a transitional term: once the two huge North American countries will acquire true national awareness, the term will not be needed any more and the study of the overseas heritage of their citizens will be parts of the newly, and more generously defined field of Canadian or American studies. At the same time, these studies will continue to overlap with the scrutiny of the ancestral cultures overseas.

The title of this volume promises studies and documents on Hungarian Cultural Presence in North America. The word "cultural" was used deliberately instead of the vague and discriminating term "ethnic." "North America" was used to give recognition to the many similarities in the evolution of the Hungarian culture in Canada and the United States. No disrespect was meant to the political separateness of these two countries; nor was it intended to deny the peculiarities of the Hungarian culture in each of them.

One purpose of this collection of studies and documents was to illustrate the variety of preoccupations, approaches and methodologies which exist in the study of the Hungarian phenomenon in North America. Two of the papers focus on the overseas cradle, the Hungarian roots of some aspects of North American society. Maria H. Krisztinkovich traces the Hungarian cultural heritage which some of Canada's German-speaking Hutterite communities acquired during their stay in Hungary where they had sought refuge from religious persecution during the seventeenth century. Mary Boros-Kazai deals with an issue related to the presence of Hungarians in North America: the attitude of Hungary's lawmakers to the exodus from their country to the New World during the three-and-a-half decades before the outbreak of the First World War. Martin L. Kovacs and N. F. Dreisziger concentrate on the fate of immigrants after their arrival in North America. The former focuses on the lot of Hungarian workers in turn-of-the-century Pennsylvania, and their transmigration to the Canadian prairies. The latter analyses the economic and social problems that Hungarian newcomers to Canada experienced in the interwar years. The important theme of immigrant culture maintenance through organizational efforts is touched upon in Susan M. Papp's survey of Hungarian-Canadian organizations in Ontario. In a quite unique study, M. Kontra and G. L. Nehler shed light upon another theme connected with culture maintenance and culture modification: the erosion of the mother tongue with a certain type of Hungarian immigrant. While their interview was conducted in South Bend, Indiana, it probably reveals trends that are present elsewhere in North America as well. Another aspect of culture and language maintenance is treated in the partial text of a panel discussion devoted to the topic of the problems and implications of poets writing in Hungarian while residing in an English and

French-speaking country such as Canada. This is followed by a small sample of historical documents compiled by I. Halasz de Beky touching on the question of the role of the country of emigration in an immigrant community's struggle for cultural survival. Finally, in the second part of this volume, Howard and Tamara Palmer, through a detailed survey of Magyar settlement in Alberta from pioneer days to the present, offer a case study of the Hungarian presence on this continent.

The materials printed here illustrate the potential that various types of scholarship, methods and approaches have for the discussion of immigrant cultural presence in our North American environment. The publishing of specialized articles, papers with general overviews, interviews, documents, and texts of panel discussions, can each enhance our knowledge and understanding of the subject, and can trigger further interest and exchanges of ideas. We hope it will inspire scholars to attach increased importance to more unconventional means of publishing information on their topics of interest, in our journal or elsewhere. In this respect we hope that this volume will not only be a useful contribution to the study of the Hungarian fact in North America, but will represent a modest new departure in the method of presentation of scholarly information on this subject.