

Béla K. Király
1912-2009

in lieu of an obituary, a biographical essay:

**Improving the Image of Hungary in the
English-Speaking World:
Béla Király's Lifelong Passion**

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In North America hundreds of people of Hungarian descent have taken upon themselves the mission of speaking on behalf of Hungary and Hungarian culture. These self-appointed spokespersons, scholars or otherwise, keep track of any and every “home-boy and home-girl” with claims to celebrity, of everyone with a Hungarian surname, of everyone whose surname is an anglicized or Americanized version of what may have been a Hungarian name at one time. After all, they have to try harder; persons of Hungarian descent are outnumbered by Polish-Americans, by American-Jews who do not have a Hungarian background, by so many other ethnic groups who began crossing the Atlantic in large numbers as part of the immigration “revolution” at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries.¹

In the 1920s the United States adopted, in stages, an immigration policy where there had been none; this policy, based on quotas, resulted, for all practical purposes, in the exclusion of East Europeans.² Except for a smattering of displaced persons (DPs) in the aftermath of World War II.³ There was no major shift in the patterns of immigration or in the pertinent federal policies between the 1920s and

the Hungarian Revolution of 1956. Then the government of the United States, perhaps prompted by feelings of guilt,⁴ and more likely by propaganda considerations, realizing it had done little or nothing collectively to assist the freedom fighters in their fight, relented and admitted over thirty-five thousand Hungarian refugees out of turn,⁵ beyond the so-called quota, in one “fell swoop” — about two-thirds of whom settled permanently in the country. At the risk of alienating several colleagues of Hungarian background who have legitimate claims to the same title, this brief essay focuses on the person who, in my opinion, has done the most for the cause of promoting and disseminating Hungarian culture, including a knowledge of Hungarian history, in the United States and in English: namely General and Professor Béla K. Király.

Perhaps the crowning achievement of Király's career, as scholar and as sponsor of Hungarian causes and culture, are the two series of publications he initiated twenty years after his arrival in the United States, starting in 1977: the “Brooklyn College Studies on Society in Change,” soon renamed the “Atlantic Studies on Society in Change,” including the sub-series “War and Society in East-Central Europe.” The series was printed at first at Lisse by the Peter de Ridder Press, but was soon taken over and distributed by the more prestigious Columbia University Press. Retroactively, all of it is part of the undertaking of Atlantic Research and Publications, headed, of course, by editor-in-chief Béla K. Király. At the same time, many of the volumes are part of the series “East European Monographs” published by the historian and scholar of Romanian background Stephen Fischer-Galati.

In conversation, Király summed up the objectives of the series — especially applicable to *War and Society in East-Central Europe*⁶ — as follows: “to cover all aspects and periods of Hungarian history for the benefit of the English-speaking public” (personal communication, Béla Király to author). His *published* statement is somewhat more circumspect: the Preface to one of the more recent volumes notes that the “series intends to present a comprehensive survey of many aspects of East Central European history”⁷ a variant of which reads “a series which, when completed, will constitute a comprehensive survey of the many aspects of East Central European society.”⁸

Of course, there is no such thing as the definitive history, or even a “comprehensive survey,” of anything, for (a) historical interpretations are subject to revision, in accordance with the spirit of the age (sometimes in spite of it), and (b) hitherto unnoticed gaps become visible, as ever-new fields and specialties cater to fresh perceptions of the human condition. Scholars who have chosen history, or some other social science, as their discipline often feel the urge to justify their choice by challenging the latest interpretations and by uncovering, then covering, previously unimagined gaps.

If we assume that 1990 was the year of regime change in Hungary (as in much of the region), we may break down the topics addressed in the series as follows: from 1977 until that year 32 of the 65 volumes sponsored by Király *do not* deal with Hungary or East-Central Europe in general. Of the 63 volumes that have been published since that year only three do not have Hungary as the protagonist country. The volumes were printed in seven hundred to one thousand copies, albeit only about half of these were sold within the first year of printing (personal communication, Peter Pastor to author, April 8, 2007). As is the case with scholarly monographs in general, apart from some of the major public libraries, most copies were purchased by universities, which means that the readership — more precisely, the perusal — goes far beyond the number of copies sold.

As an experiment, I picked a volume from the series, more or less at random, to ascertain the availability over the internet. Eva Haraszti's *Kossuth as an English Journalist* is available for purchase, possibly as a second-hand copy, as are most of the other volumes in the series, for \$69.00. It has been reviewed as a blog 537 times (www.allbookstores.com/book).

It may be argued that there was greater interest on the part of the West, and funding was more readily available for publications on East-Central Europe, during the Cold War. Yet the numbers above belie that assertion. Whether or not Király considered himself a cold war warrior (probably not, in the later stages of that war), he was able to organize and find subsidies for the series at a time when the region — at least the region north of the Balkans — was no longer the focus of Western and international interest and preoccupations. Peter Pastor confirms that Király deserves most of the credit for the fund-raising and for the painstaking organizational work involved in publishing such a long series of books, on topics which may not have been particularly topical.

In all fairness, it must be noted that such a gigantic undertaking cannot be the work of a single individual. Stephen Fischer-Galati took on the responsibility of printing most of the series under the aegis of “East European Monographs.” Indeed, many of the volumes receive a number as part of that series. Istvan Deak, the head of the East-Central European Institute at Columbia University for many years, used his power and prestige for the cause. Peter Pastor played a major role in recruiting and recommending Hungarian authors; Pastor and Király have parted ways since, and Pastor has launched yet another series of scholarly monographs. The translators, myself included, deserve credit, for making many of the Hungarian works available to the public at large, and turning them into readable products, sometimes more readable than the original, for minimal “material reward.”

Not surprisingly, the quality of the scholarship and writing is consistently high in these monographs, most of the authors being American and Hungarian

scholars of distinction. To mention some of the distinguished Hungarian scholars in random order, there are works by György Péteri, Domokos Kosáry, Géza Perjés, György Borsányi, Ignác Romsics, János Mazsu, György Csepeli, András Gerő, Tibor Glant, Tibor Frank — half of which I had the privilege of translating.⁹ My name appears on the title page of several of the 120 or so monographs, and it would appear on a few more if Béla *bátyám* — as he permitted me to address him — had not forgotten to mention it in a few more of the publications, including his rather successful history of Hungary;¹⁰ indeed, he was somewhat casual in his approach to attributions (in my case, justifiably so, on the grounds that I did get paid, what more could I expect?). On the other hand, it may be simply that Király attached less importance to the work of the translator as opposed to the creative contributions of an editor.

Many of the authors involved in the series are not of Hungarian extraction. Thus, volume 30 of the series, entitled *The First War between Socialist States: The Hungarian Revolution of 1956 and its Impact* has an array of distinguished international contributors such as Hannah Arendt, Albert Camus, Milovan Djilas, or Jean-Paul Sartre.¹¹ The same authors' contributions are reprinted in the monumental volume dedicated to the revolution of 1956 and issued at the time of the fiftieth anniversary, in 2006.¹² On the other hand, the *Festschrift* in honor of Király, published under the title *Society in Change, Studies in Honor of Béla K. Király*,¹³ is a collection of unrelated essays written by thirty-five scholars, the majority Americans of Hungarian descent. The latter volume includes a short biography of Király by Béla Vardy and a bibliography of his works by Agnes Vardy. It is part of the East European Monographs series but, appropriately enough, does not figure among the series edited by Király.

I recall only one exception to Király's norm of high standards: volume 66, a posthumous work by Sándor Biró, entitled *The Nationalities Problem in Transylvania, 1867-1940* was an error in judgment on Király's (and my own) part.¹⁴

Apparently the manuscript had been submitted to one of the state publishing houses in Hungary during the previous regime and was duly rejected. Presumably, it was a case of censorship, or at least we jumped to that conclusion. After announcing, in the introduction, that his intention is to "finally" restore balance and objectivity to the treatment of the subject, Biró proceeds to exonerate the Hungarian governments of any discrimination vis-à-vis the Romanian ethnic group during the period of the Dual Monarchy, while castigating the Romanian government for its maltreatment of the Hungarian minority after 1919. I do not know how Ceausescu's media reacted to this rather crude and wordy diatribe. One American reviewer apostrophized — somewhat unfairly — “when will this ever stop?” Obviously, the fact that a book has been censored is no guarantee of high merits.

Biró's analysis was a distortion of historical reality; this does not mean

that Király is remiss for meaning to safeguard the good name of the Hungarian nation. When I suggested that he should sponsor my father's diary, written during the German occupation in 1944 and published in 1946, but only in Hungarian,¹⁵ he remained silent. Clearly, my father's perception of Hungarian subservience to Nazi Germany, from one of his many hiding places during that *annee terrible*, would not redound to the credit of the nation.

Béla Király was born in 1912 at Kaposvár, the son of the stationmaster. Pressured by his father, he competed for and won a scholarship to the Ludovika Military Academy (which bears a distant resemblance to West Point). He was an officer of the Hungarian general staff during most of World War II, although he spent several stints on the Eastern Front. At one point, he was in a position to intercede on behalf of the Jewish conscripts serving in the so-called labour battalions (for which he would eventually receive a commendation from Yad Vashem in Israel). In early 1945 he surrendered to the Red Army at Szombathely, was taken prisoner, escaped from POW camp, made his way back to Budapest and returned to military service. Appointed commander of a new Military Academy, he was arrested in 1951 and sentenced to death on trumped-up charges. Although his sentence was commuted, he was not informed of the commutation, and sat on death row until late in the summer of 1956, a few weeks before the revolution broke out.¹⁶

During the October 1956 revolution Király was appointed Commander of the National Guard by Prime Minister Imre Nagy. As Soviet forces reentered Budapest he fled westward with some troops, and crossed the border into Austria a few days later, where he was “debriefed” by the Americans.¹⁷ Upon his arrival in the United States he continued to study English and soon enrolled at Columbia University, to pursue a doctorate degree in history. His dissertation, *Hungary in the Late Eighteenth Century; the Decline of Enlightened Despotism*, was published by Columbia University Press.¹⁸ At the same time he took up the cause of the freedom fighters, relentlessly denouncing Soviet intervention. Sponsored by the Department of State (and, possibly, other agencies of the United States government), he traveled on speaking tours across the United States, and in Asia. Eventually, he became a spokesperson not only for the revolutionaries, but for the Hungarian nation. “None is more distinguished” as a cultural ambassador, writes Béla S. Várdy, who is a cultural ambassador in his own right.¹⁹

Thus, in the aftermath of 1956 Király played an important role — perhaps the most important among all-time Hungarian refugees since Lajos Kossuth — as speaker and teacher. For many years after his arrival in the United States, he was the foremost spokesperson for the revolutionaries — at least those revolutionaries who found refuge abroad — at the United Nations and other venues. I recall his account of an address he was supposed to deliver to an assembly of high school

and middle school students in an auditorium, somewhere among the yellow cornfields of Kansas undulating in the summer breeze, in the middle of America. Confronting several hundred rowdy teenagers who had little incentive to listen, much less to learn, he was nevertheless able to find the right tone, thanks in part to his imposing physical stature. The students came away from the session, knowing what Hungary is, knowing that Hungary mattered.²⁰

Király taught European and military history to several generations of students at Brooklyn College of the City University of New York, and elsewhere. I am sure he impressed them with his commanding, yet fatherly appearance: he was well into his sixties when he started to teach. He brooked no indiscipline. When he hired me to teach a summer course, he told me in no uncertain terms to make sure I met my classes regularly and on time. His staff, who eventually received medals of knighthood from Király and the new Hungarian government, perceived him as a taskmaster.

Király was also a founder of the Association for the Advancement of the Study of Hungarian History, recently and more elegantly renamed the Hungarian Studies Association. The Association has a distinguished record as a lobby for Hungarian history, within the confines of the American Association for the Advancement of Slavic Studies.²¹

It should redound to the credit of Király and of the Association that they have gone out of their way to preserve or establish positive relations with sister historical organizations of Slavic and Romanian scholars.

In 1990 Király returned to his homeland. While the common assumption is that politicians (and generals) in exile rarely affect the course of events, because it is those who stayed behind who suffered the brunt of persecution, he proved that there are exceptions to this rule. He ran for a seat in Parliament in the district of Kaposvár and won.

I hope I may be permitted some autobiographical notes to help explain and justify my claim of “expertise” on the subject of Király's contributions. I had met Béla *bátyám* shortly after his arrival in United States, in the apartment my parents occupied on Madison Avenue at 91st Street, in Manhattan, New York City. I am not sure why Király came to visit, unless it was to “pay his respects” to old-time, so-called liberal politicians in exile, such as my father.²²

I was to meet Király again a few years later, at his home in Highland Lakes, New Jersey, and remained in touch almost till his death.

At one point single, homeless and unemployed, I abused his hospitality for two months at a stretch. I have fond memories of Béla *bátyám* and his cozy abode. Apart from his memorabilia and the valuable pieces of art and keepsakes sent to him by his admirers, the place was modest. The plumbing never worked. Béla kept a pail of water next to the commode, which I and other guests

were expected to use to flush the toilet, military style (and refill the pail after each use). He owned no dishwasher; I was instrumental in introducing him — after he became an outstanding chef in his own not-for-profit restaurant — to the kitchen utensil known as a dish-rack, which facilitates the draining of water from dishes still wet. I gained his respect by expressing curiosity about his collection of beloved pigeons and doves, one of his areas of interest since early childhood — which he was forced to relinquish upon his return to Hungary from the United States.

I went back to Highland Lakes many times over the years, to discuss the translation of monographs or some other subject. When I found myself in exile at the University of Khartoum in the Sudan, he invited me for a summer term to Brooklyn College, where he became chair of the History Department, not long after receiving his doctorate from Columbia University. I was staying free of charge at the Roters' nearby. Since Király's return to Hungary in the aftermath of the change of regime in 1989-90, I was able to visit him — and abuse his hospitality again — in his old-new home in Budapest. I encouraged him to write his memoirs, and he rewarded me by asking me to translate it into palatable English; the truth be told, I incurred his displeasure by repeatedly mixing up the English equivalents of Hungarian military ranks.

These memoirs constitute volume 127 in the series. Another volume has been issued since. Although the entire series is in English, some of the recent volumes have also appeared in Hungarian. A complete multi-volume history of Hungary (in English) is in the offing, co-sponsored by the Hungarian Academy of Arts and Sciences.²³

It is not easy to assess the reputation of Hungary and of Hungarians in the English-speaking world. It would be even more difficult to tell how much of the positive reputation can be traced to the contributions of Király and his publishing ventures. Obviously, Hungarian exiles disagree with one another; so do some of their children and grandchildren. There were plenty of Hungarian chauvinists, and others who may be described as right-wingers, who were incapable of appreciating what Király was doing for their motherland. When the Congress of the United States was debating whether to return Saint Stephen's Crown into the custody of the Government of the People's Republic of Hungary, he was one of only two witnesses to testify and advocate the return (this was long before the change of regime) against several dozen die-hard “conservatives” who claimed to represent the Hungarian ethnic group in America.

Király's voice was always one of moderation and tolerance. Perhaps all we can conclude for certain is that, were it not for his efforts, the country's name abroad would have suffered even more than it has.

NOTES

¹ The literature on immigration is almost as vast as the bibliography of American history itself. As regards the Hungarian ethnic group, see Elemér Bakó, *Magyarok az Amerikai Egyesült Államokban* [Hungarians in the United States of America] (Budapest: Magyarok Világszövetsége, 1998); Desi K. Bognar, *Hungarians in America, a Biographical Dictionary* (New York, 1971); Gyula Borbándi, *A magyar emigráció életrajza, 1945-1985* [A Biography of Hungarian Emigration, 1945-1985] (Munich: 1986); Istvan Mocsy, *The Effects of World War I, the Uprooted. Hungarian Refugees and Their Impact*, which constitutes Vol. 31 in the series on Atlantic Studies on Society in Change; Julianna Puskás, *Kivándorló magyarok az Egyesült Államokban* [Immigrant Hungarians in the United States] (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1982); Miklós Szántó, *Magyarok Amerikában* [Hungarians in America] (Budapest: Gondolat, 1984); Béla Várdy, *Magyarok az újvilágban: az észak-amerikai magyarság rendhagyó története* [Hungarians in the New World: An Unorthodox History of Hungarian-Americans] (Budapest: A Magyar Nyelv és Kultúra Nemzetközi Társasága, 2000).

² For good analyses see Tibor Frank, "Patterns of Interwar Hungarian Immigration to the United States," *Hungarian Studies Review*, 30, 1-2 (2003): 3-27; also the chapter by the same author, "Az amerikai Kongresszus és bevándorláskorlátozó politikái, 1879-1924" [The American Congress and Its Policies Curtailing Immigration, 1879-1924] in *Gyarmatokból Imperium* [From Colonies to Empire], ed. T. Frank (Budapest: Gondolat, 2007).

³ For instance, the posthumous novel of Miksa Fenyo, *Jézus is DP volt* [Jesus Also Was a DP] (Budapest: Argumentum, 2006).

⁴ See, for instance, Paul Nemes, "The Welcome Refugees," *Central European Review*, 1.19 (1999): 1.

⁵ The estimates regarding the number of refugees admitted into the United States vary from 30,000 to 80,000, perhaps because the authors use different time frames. See, inter alia, S. A. Weinstock, *Acculturation and Occupation: A Study of the 1956 Hungarian Refugees in the United States*, or Ferenc Cseresznyés, "The 56 Exodus to Austria," *The Hungarian Quarterly*, 40.154 (1999). Even Borbándi's latest contribution, "Hungarian Emigrants and the Revolution" published in the memorial volume to the Revolution of 1956 (pp. 672-95), does not provide specific figures other than "40,000."

⁶ The term East Central Europe is the one used by most Hungarian scholars, while American social scientists tend to lump all of Europe east of Germany into the "Eastern Europe" basket.

⁷ See for instance, "Preface" to Tibor Glant, *Through the Prism of the Habsburg Monarchy* (New York: Columbia UP, 1998): vii. and "Preface" to Eva H. Haraszti, *Kossuth as an English Journalist* (New York: Columbia UP, 1990): 5.

⁸ Appendix to each volume in the series Atlantic Studies on Society in Change.

⁹ Vol. 35, *Effects of World War I: War Communism in Hungary* (New York:

Columbia UP, 1984); Vol. 48, *The Press During the Hungarian Revolution of 1848-1849* (New York: Columbia UP, 1986); Vol. 56, *The Fall of the Medieval Kingdom of Hungary: Mohács, 1526, Buda 1541* (New York: Columbia UP, 1989); Vol. 75, *The Life of a Communist Revolutionary, Béla Kun*, (New York: Columbia UP, 1993); Vol. 83, *Istvan Bethlen: A Great Conservative Statesman of Hungary, 1874-1946* (New York: Columbia UP, 1995; the title is somewhat awkward, inasmuch as the term "statesman" implies *eo ipso* greatness); Vol. 89, *The Social History of the Hungarian Intelligentsia, 1825-1914* (New York: Columbia UP, 1997); Vol. 91, *National Identity in Contemporary Hungary* (New York: Columbia UP, 1997); Vol. 92, *The Hungarian Parliament, 1867-1928: A Mirage of Power* (New York: Columbia UP, 1997); Vol. 95, *Through the Prism of the Habsburg Monarchy: Hungary in American Diplomacy and Public Opinion During World War I* (New York: Columbia UP, 1998); Vol. 105, *From Habsburg Agent to Victorian Scholar: G. G. Zerffi* (New York: Columbia UP, 2000).

¹⁰ Béla K. Király, *History of Modern Hungary, 1867-1999* (Boston: Krieger Publishing, 2001).

¹¹ No. 30. Béla K. Király, Barbara Lotze, Nandor Dreisziger, eds. (New York: Columbia UP, 1984).

¹² 1956: *the Hungarian Revolution and War for Independence*, ed. by Lee Congdon, Béla K Király and Karoly Nagy (New York: Columbia UP, 2006).

¹³ Edited by Steven Béla Vardy and Agnes Huszar Vardy (New York: Columbia UP, 1983).

¹⁴ No. 66, Sandor Biró (New York: Columbia UP, 1992).

¹⁵ Fenyő Miksa, *Az elsodort ország* [The country swept away] (Budapest, 1986); 1st ed., 1946.

¹⁶ See Chapter V in *Wars, Revolutions and Regime Changes in Hungary, 1912-2004. Reminiscences of an Eyewitness*, (New York: Columbia UP, 2006). An earlier version was published in Hungary and in Hungarian, entitled *Amire nincs ige: visszaemlékezések, 1912-2004* (Budapest: HVG Kiado, 2004).

¹⁷ See Chapter 6 in *Wars, Revolutions and Regime Changes in Hungary*.

¹⁸ *Hungary in the Late Eighteenth Century: The Decline of Enlightened Despotism* (New York: Columbia UP, 1969). For a fair assessment of Király as historian, see also his other works, including his study of Deák as a public figure: *Ferenc Deák* (Boston: Twayne, 1975).

¹⁹ Vardy and Vardy, eds., *op. cit.*, p. 4. Although his assessment is in measured terms, Steven Vardy refers to Király's "prodigious achievement" given his age (this was in 1983, a quarter of a century ago).

²⁰ See Chapter 7 in *Wars, Revolutions and Regime Changes in Hungary*.

²¹ Its goal is to further interest and to encourage research in Hungarian history, politics, and cultural affairs." It issues a bulletin or newsletter four or five times a year, and co-sponsors *The Hungarian Studies Review*, produced in Canada, under the editorship of Nandor Dreisziger.

²² Both Király and the Vardys described my father's politics as "monarchist." With all due respect this borders on the ridiculous, albeit it is true that both my father and I

attended a dinner in honour of Otto von Habsburg at the Dupont Hotel in Washington, D.C.

²³ Personal communication by Király to author, April 28, 2007.