

A Review Article:

Hungarians in the American Civil War, 1861-1865

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István Kornél Vida. *Hungarian Émigrés in the American Civil War*. Jefferson, N.C., and London: McFarland & Co. Publishers, 2012. III + 256 pages. Paper.

The Civil War, which lasted for four bloody years from 1861 to 1865, was the most pivotal event in the history of the United States. Consequently, the volume of writings on it is simply staggering. Now that we are in the midst of commemorating the 150th anniversary of that monumental struggle, the already prodigious literature is certain to expand.

While every conceivable aspect of the war has received attention from historians and writers, one area that has been relatively neglected is the participation of the “ethnics”. It is often forgotten that many of the soldiers and sailors on both sides were foreign-born. Even though this non-native element was composed chiefly of Germans and the Irish, virtually every European nationality was represented in the ranks of the blue and the grey. One of the smaller groups involved in the conflict was the Hungarians.

Accepted estimates of the Hungarian population of the United States in the early 1860s peg the figure at no more than 3,000, with the overwhelming majority residing in the North. The number of Hungarians in the fight was thus small but proportionately high. Precise figures are impossible to state; some of the more exuberant writers claim numbers close to one thousand. However, between 200 and 300 is far more realistic. About 150 of these individuals can be thoroughly documented. Their Civil War service is fully described in official records as well as in a host of standard reference works about the conflict.

Because Hungarians were few in numbers and widely scattered over the country, there never was any unit, large or small, composed entirely or predominantly of Hungarians. What the Hungarians lacked in numbers they made up in achievements. From this small group emerged two full generals, four brigadier-generals by brevet, some twenty colonels, and around thirty

majors and captains. Of course some remained humble privates; one of them being none other than the incomparable Joseph Pulitzer. The dozen or so Hungarians who held commissions in the so-called colored regiments have had their names inscribed on the African-American Civil War Memorial.

The impressive and startling attainments of the Hungarians can be attributed to the fact that the majority of them had substantial military experience; many were veterans of the 1848-49 War of Liberation led by the charismatic Lajos Kossuth against the ruling Hapsburg dynasty and some also saw action in the Crimean War and the European wars of the 1850s.

These individuals constituted a rather unique and distinct group; by no means did they represent a typical cross-section of society. Forming the first significant wave of immigrants to the United States from Hungary, they were predominantly political refugees. They were the scions of reasonably well-to-do middle class families while some were members of the lesser nobility. They had the benefit of a good education and were fluent in several languages but seldom in English. Destitute, land-hungry peasants and poor manual laborers made superfluous by industrial progress were few among them. Immigrants belonging to these social strata wouldn't arrive in droves until the mid-1870s.

Incidentally, Hungarian contributions in the war were not confined to military service. Books and articles penned by participants constitute an important segment of the war literature and are prized as primary sources by writers to this very day. About a half dozen Hungarians served as physicians in the field or in hospitals. Early in the war, General John C. Frémont, rather than devising an elaborate code, employed Hungarian to communicate with the White House and subordinate field officers. The cavalry saddle was an adaptation of the Hungarian model as explained by General George B. McClellan in his *Own Story*. It is perhaps also worthwhile to mention that after the war a significant number of Hungarians were active in veterans' organizations, especially the GAR (Grand Army of the Republic), with several of them holding high and responsible positions.

Therefore it's perhaps not too surprising that the extent of information about Hungarians in the Civil War is very substantial to say the least. The "Bible" of the war, the massive 128-volume *War of the Rebellion*, alone contains well over one thousand citation of documents by, to, and about them.

Collecting information on any particular individual in recent years has been immeasurably helped by advances in online search technologies and strategies, greater access to archival materials and obscure, out-of-print publications, and the ready exchange of findings among amateur and professional researchers.

Despite the plethora of information on Hungarians, no single, comprehensive book has been written about them before Prof. Vida's excellent book. Previously, the only such work available on the subject has been *Lincoln's Hungarian Heroes* by Edmund Vasvary, published in 1939. The slim volume by a dedicated researcher and collector of Hungarian-Americana can be most accurately described as a commendable pioneering effort. It must be borne in mind that Mr. Vasvary worked without the advantages of our modern research and communications tools and he did not have the assistance of other interested parties. By the way, Vasvary's modest monograph was incorporated almost entirely into those other much praised pioneering works concerning the participation of the non-native born in the Civil War, namely Ella Lonn's *Foreigners in the Union Army and Navy* (1952) and *Foreigners in the Confederacy* (1965).

With the publication of Prof. Vida's book, no one can complain about the lack of a thorough and authoritative book on the role of Hungarians in the Civil War. This outstanding work, the culmination of a decade of research, covers the subject in an exemplary fashion and is an indispensable tool for anyone interested in any aspect of Hungarian involvement.

The text is essentially divided into two parts. One presents the historical background leading up to the Civil War. This review is absolutely essential to understand the lives of the individual Hungarians which constitutes the other principal section of the book. Prof. Vida, who has authored a wide range of publications on Hungarian-American history, deserves considerable credit for compressing the complex political events occurring in the United States and Europe during the 1840s and 1850s into succinct narrative without sacrificing accuracy. Keeping in accordance with the theme, the biographical sketches concentrate on military service during the Civil War.

The three best known and most chronicled Hungarians of the war are Alexander Asboth, Julius Stahel, and Charles Zagonyi. Therefore they garner the lion's share of the ink. Kossuth's faithful companion, Asboth was Frémont's chief-of-staff in the Western Department and concluded his military career as major-general by brevet. Stahel, a full major-general and winner of the Congressional Medal of Honor, had a memorable cat-and mouse game with John Singleton Mosby, the elusive "Gray Ghost" of the Confederacy. Charles Zagonyi, commander of Frémont's Body Guard in Missouri, gained lasting glory with his daring cavalry charge against a superior enemy force at Springfield on October 24, 1861.

Zagonyi is unquestionably the most celebrated Hungarian of the Civil War. His fame rests entirely on that single event which immediately captured the public imagination. Newspapers extolled the reckless bravery of the

troopers and George Boker penned a poem, simply entitled *Zagonyi*. He is the overt hero of Jessie Benton Frémont's acclaimed *The Story of the Guard*. The passing of years hasn't diminished fascination with the daring deed and Zagonyi has been honored by monuments, plaques, statues, medallions and in sundry other ways. He has also been incorporated into the popular literature; he appears as the savior who rides to the rescue in the nick of time in a slew of Hungarian and American fictional tales.

Other notable figures in blue include the flamboyant and controversial Colonel Frederick George D'Utassy; Frederick Knefler, one of the brevet brigadier-generals and life-long friend of Lew Wallace; Colonel Geza Mihailotzy who had two forts named in his memory following his death from wounds sustained in action; distinguished colonels Eugene Kozlay, Nicholas Perczel and Philip Figyelmessy; the four Rombauer brothers, and the five nephews of the great Kossuth himself: the four Zulavsky brothers and Albert Ruttkay.

Bela Estvan, the only Hungarian to attain high rank in the Confederate army, was — as Vida points out — a truly enigmatic and mysterious figure. Better remembered for his book *War Pictures from the South* than for military valor, he has also been labeled as devious and deceitful. His book, praised by some for its vivid and realistic narrative and scorned by others as blatant plagiarism, was extremely popular when first published during the war. Its appeal has remained undiminished; various editions have been reprinted and selected chapters from it included in anthologies. As for Estvan himself, the discovery of additional personal facts would go a long way in allowing to draw a fuller and more accurate portrait of the man.

A frequently voiced complaint about similar books is the almost exclusive emphasis on the military service of the individuals considered and very little or no information about their lives before and after the war. This is certainly not the case in Prof. Vida's book. Drawing chiefly on the massive émigré literature of the 1850s, he provides extensive details about their pre-Civil War days. While a handful of the veterans returned to Hungary in wake of the Compromise of 1867 which set up the Dual Monarchy of Austria-Hungary, the bulk remained in America. The majority enjoyed long, fruitful lives; others died not long afterwards at a relatively young age. In several instances wounds sustained and deprivations endured were definite contributors to poor health and early death.

The most successful post-war career definitely belonged to Joseph Pulitzer whose meteoric rise in journalism and influence in American politics is known by educated people throughout the world along with his bequests to

fund Columbia University's School of Journalism and the prestigious prizes which bear his name. In 1947, the year which marked the 100th anniversary of his birth, the U.S. Post Office issued a stamp in his honor. More than twenty acclaimed books have addressed the story of his life and resounding success. While none of the others reached the lofty accomplishments of Pulitzer, they enjoyed rewarding careers and made positive contributions to their communities in a multitude of ways.

Throughout the book Dr. Vida alerts the reader to major and minor factual errors, both in American and Hungarian sources, primary as well as secondary. Regrettably, mistakes are plentiful and may arise from a number of reasons. Unfortunately errors are bound to occur in any publication, no matter how carefully edited and reviewed.

Recurring errors, errors that are repeated time after time because they have become firmly imbedded in the general literature, are particularly annoying. Among the most prevalent of these concerning Hungarians are that Frémont's Body Guard was composed mostly of Hungarians, that Zagonyi returned to Hungary after the war and opened a cigar shop, that the Hungarian element was dominant among the men and officers of the 39th New York Infantry Regiment (Garibaldi Guard), and that Leonidas Haskell on Frémont's staff was a Hungarian who Anglicized his name. Hence, Haskell is routinely footnoted as a Hungarian in American writings and this spurious claim is accepted at face value even by a few Hungarian authors.

Given all the misconceptions and errors, it would have been advantageous to devote a chapter listing and discussing them, and then correcting them with compelling proof. Perhaps such measure would dispel these types of mistakes from serious historical writings once and for all.

The book contains a judicious selection of quality black & white illustrations, mainly photographs, which add to the appearance of the book and enhance the value of the text. However, the virtual absence of maps is puzzling. Maps, depicting strategic locations and places of special significance, would undoubtedly be appreciated even by the geographically astute reader. The war covered such a broad terrain and involved so many sites that even dedicated Civil War buffs have to resort to maps on a regular basis.

Hungarian family names invariably pose a formidable challenge to Americans not only in pronunciation but also in spelling. Consequently, names in print often appear in a bewildering array of forms; there are newspaper articles in which the same name is spelled several ways without any rhyme or reason. To cope with this difficulty, Dr. Vida lists commonly encountered variations of names. Being aware of these versions is very helpful, particularly when conducting online searches. On the other hand, it seems that the spelling

of Hungarian names is bound only by the imagination of the writer and startling forms are likely to mushroom with unrestrained vigor. For example, some scholarly publications mentioning Joseph Vandor, colonel of the 7th Wisconsin Infantry, have him “Dutchified” to Van Dor!

The book cites a large array of Hungarian sources. Generally speaking, books having the text in one language but including references in another language seldom bother with translation. This can be frustrating for readers able to handle only the principal language. Perhaps it’s time to start a new trend. Since this monograph will likely be utilized chiefly by Americans not conversant with Hungarian, having at least the title of the citation accompanied by the equivalent text in English would have been a definite plus. An added bonus would have been to summarize the contents with a couple of short sentences.

There is much more about Hungarians than can be squeezed into a book, even a very voluminous one. Besides the huge quantity of readily available and well-arranged primary and secondary sources, there are collections — bristling with details about Hungarians — which have yet to be examined or even organized properly. Among these virtually untapped resources are D’Utassy papers at the New York Historical Society; the writings of Eugene Kozlay, presented not long ago to the Petőfi Museum in Hungary by Janet and Doug Kozlay; and the sundry documents donated to the Missouri Historical Society over the years by descendants of the Rombauer family.

Descendants of the veterans deserve more than a passing mention. For example, Haldemann Figyelmessy, son of Philip Figyelmessy, was a daredevil pilot who frequently gave exhibitions of his flying skills before suffering fatal injuries in a crash. Paul E. Vandor, son of Joseph Vandor, was a prominent newspaperman in the Far West and author of *History of Fresno County, California*. King Vidor, one of America’s most intellectual and beloved film directors, was the grandson of Charles Vidor, long-time resident of Galveston, Texas. Amazingly enough, there are at least a dozen families today in America and in Europe who are keenly aware of the participation of their ancestors in the Civil War and who have rendered invaluable service to researchers by providing access to family documents.

All the information currently available on the Hungarians of the Civil War would easily furnish material to fill several volumes. Hopefully, Professor Vida will continue to devote his attention to this topic and will write additional books of the same high caliber.