

ETHNIC COMMUNITIES AND THE RETENTION OF CULTURAL TRADITIONS IN THE 1990s

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The purpose of my paper is to make a specific proposal on a very significant American-Hungarian need: the retention of cultural traditions in Hungarian ethnic communities. Since my purpose is not a detailed scholarly discussion, but the presentation of a public issue and proposals for addressing it, my approach will be necessarily one based on an analysis of current problems and their public significance in the 1990's.

I will begin by proposing two key definitions. By ethnic communities I mean immigrant settlements that were established since the 1880's in US urban centers and have preserved identities related to Hungarian immigrants and their descendants. These communities have preserved certain cultural traditions brought to America by Hungarian immigrants. These cultural traditions can be defined as customs, values, loyalties and ideals derived from Hungarian village society of the late nineteenth century. Special emphasis was placed on attachments to the family, the extended kinship system, the village as the larger community, religious values and customs, and the particular region of origin in Hungary. These attachments were retained, but in the course of the American experience were transferred to immigrant settlements, institutions and customs.

At the beginning of the 1990's Hungarian ethnic communities in the United States are experiencing complex changes that may lead to their dissolution as distinct communities. These changes have already transformed Hungarian communities in the past fifty years. The forces of change include economic, social, occupational, educational and demographic transformations with significant impacts on American society as well as ethnic communities. Therefore it is highly important, first, to understand how ethnic communities have been transformed by these forces of change, and secondly, to consider possible courses of action designed to retain, strengthen and revitalize Hungarian ethnic communities. This paper contributes to both these concerns by outlining the institutional evolution of Hungarian ethnic communities and recommending specific courses of action to strengthen their institutional and cultural capacities.

An understanding of the current condition of Hungarian ethnic communities requires consideration of four basic issues that have contributed to their past development. These are: (1) the Hungarian heritage of immigrants or the emigrant background, (2) the formation of immigrant settlements in the American historical, social and geographical environment, (3) the development and role of Hungarian organizations, and

(4) the social, economic and cultural transformations of Hungarian communities since their establishment and the impacts of those transformations on Hungarian community life.

The ethnic heritage or emigrant background of immigrants is unquestionably one of the most important and enduring characteristics of immigrant communities. The emigrant background refers to the specific social, cultural, economic and regional characteristics of emigrants at the time they enter the new society and those patterns of thought and activity that are formed by those characteristics. Studies of the immigrant experience or any aspect of that experience should give prominent attention to the key role of the emigrant background. The excellent analysis of Julianna Puskás provides us with a comprehensive study of the Hungarian emigrant background.¹ The key elements of the characteristics of Hungarian immigrants can be stated as follows. The great majority of Hungarian immigrants who established communities in the US prior to World War I were predominantly small landholders or agricultural wage earners. They originated from the peasant society of the late nineteenth century: the Hungarian village. Within that society, the family, kinship, the village community, customs and traditions emphasizing the primacy of the community were predominant. One of the important elements of the emigrant background was the motive to emigrate from Hungary and to select the United States as the country of destination. There existed substantial reasons for emigration in the late nineteenth century that are applicable to Hungary as a whole, but particularly to certain regions of the country that experienced severe social and economic dislocation. These regional differentiations explain to a great extent the patterns of emigration from northeastern Hungary and several other regions of heavy emigration. Beyond these national and regional patterns, we can note how the contemporary Hungarian emigrant justified emigration and still maintained close ties with the family and village community. The primary personal motivation to emigrate was the saving of financial resources in America to pay for land, a home and other investments in the native village. Emigration was a means by which a family sought to strengthen its economic position in the Hungarian village community. The process of emigration worked in such a way that community ties remained intact. Those who emigrated usually traveled in groups from the same village or region. They had a specific destination in America: New Brunswick, Pittsburgh, Cleveland. There a relative or family friend expected them and provided lodging, livelihood and employment. New immigrants joined an already existing Hungarian neighborhood, congregation or fraternal society. Thus, fellow Hungarians familiar with American conditions provided needed advice, assistance and fellowship. In this manner, first generation immigrants came to America with very strong attachments to their families, traditions, village and religious life. In America they continued to remain attached to their traditions, while seeking to adjust them to the urban new world environment. We can conclude therefore that loyalty to their traditional way of life, attachment to their community and the desire for social, economic and personal advancement were the principal values that Hungarians of the first generation brought with them and attempted to apply in America.

The second important element of immigrant institutional life was the immigrant settlement.² Immigrant community life developed in these communities. These settlements were generally established near major urban and industrial centers. They were residential clusters based on ethnic, religious and regional loyalties. While there certainly occurred residential intermingling of different ethnic groups, each of them maintained its group identity. This was accomplished primarily by the formation of religious (ethnic) congregations, fraternal societies, specialized organizations, and regularly scheduled cultural, educational and religious events.

We can observe this pattern of development in major metropolitan regions of the United States: Pittsburgh, Cleveland, Toledo, New York, Detroit, Buffalo, Chicago, Gary. As Table 1 indicates the favored locations of settlement for Hungarian immigrants were the urban areas of Ohio, Pennsylvania, New York and New Jersey. Although the Hungarian population shifted from these states to others throughout the United States by 1980, these four states still are the main population centers for Hungarians.

We can trace a fairly typical pattern of development in the Pittsburgh metropolitan area. The two main centers of Hungarian settlement were Hazelwood (an industrial neighborhood within the city) and McKeesport, a municipality which was an old center of heavy manufacturing. There developed several other, smaller industrial centers near Pittsburgh that became the location of Hungarian settlements. These included Homestead, Duquesne, Leechburg, Johnstown and much smaller mining communities.

One important historical and contemporary consequence of this pattern of settlement was that immigrant community life occurred within a particular regional-urban area (Pittsburgh) and more specifically within small industrial settlements in that larger region (McKeesport, Hazelwood). Within these very specific geographical settlements, Hungarian immigrants lived, worked, developed and interacted with American society. This means also that the Hungarian community is very strongly identified with these small urban industrial settlements, which over time have experienced significant population decline, industrial redevelopment and major social transformations. Nevertheless, the Hungarian immigrant community is still very much attached to them as the location of their historical experience in America.

The Hungarian immigrant settlement can be characterized therefore by the following principal elements. It is an urban settlement, originally formed in the early twentieth century, in the prominent urban centers of the United States. Immigrant settlements evolved within these urban centers and were exposed to the many transformations of urban society as these restructured American social and economic life. Hungarian immigrant settlements are predominantly industrial settlements, located in proximity to major centers of industrial employment. They were shaped and influenced by the complex problems of industrial society, including unemployment, industrial accidents, economic exploitation, social, family and educational issues. The majority of Hungarian immigrants lived and worked as industrial workers, seeking economic advancement, educational qualifications and a better life in an industrial setting. The third principal characteristic of Hungarian immigrant settlement can be described as its bi-

polar commitment to traditional values and to adjustment to an industrial society. Its traditional values are clearly evident in the attachment to family, kinship and village traditions and the attempt to retain those traditions in the American environment. Adjustment to American industrial society can be observed in two principal historical patterns: the formation of organizations seeking to secure the individual and community well-being of immigrants in industrial society, such as fraternal insurance societies and community organizations, and the evolution of economic and social patterns seeking to attain acceptance and approval in American society.

The third important element of immigrant life was the formation of several types of organizations in immigrant communities.³ These organizations responded to the needs of the immigrants in American industrial society and therefore a great number and type of such organizations were established. At the risk of simplification we can distinguish two types of organizations from the point of view of their role in the immigrant community: those that sought to preserve traditional values and institutions and those that attempted to make an adjustment to the problems and situations encountered in the new society. Examples of these two types of organizations are church congregations and organizations sponsored by them which were established to preserve religious, community and ethnic traditions in the Hungarian community, and fraternal insurance societies and civic organizations which were predominantly involved in securing economic, social and psychological adjustment to industrial life. In reality of course both types of organizations fulfilled the two functions simultaneously. For example, in the first period of settlement church congregations were the most dominant and supportive immigrant organizations, fulfilling not only functions of preservation but involved very much in social-economic assistance, education, information provision and resolution of personal problems for the immigrant. In fact, fraternal insurance societies at first were founded by church congregations at the community level, which in subsequent years were merged into such organizations as the William Penn Association and Hungarian Reformed Federation of the present. In the later phase of immigrant history, however, the fraternal benefit societies, civic organizations, business and professional groups became instrumental in promoting adjustment to American social patterns, while the church congregations fulfilled their original function of preserving traditional values.

The fourth important characteristic of Hungarian immigrant life is the transformation that affected Hungarian immigrants from the time they arrived in the United States to the present.⁴ Three main stages of this transformation can be distinguished: the first-generation stage up to World War I, the interwar period from 1920 to 1940 and the period since 1940. In the first-generation stage, the immigrant lived and worked within an almost enclosed Hungarian immigrant community. Hungarian immigrant institutions played a predominant role in the life of the immigrant. Immigrant contacts with American society were quite limited. Usually religious leaders of the community provided the primary link with American society. No major adjustment to American social patterns evolved in this stage. In the second stage of development, in the period following 1920, the immigrant community was transformed. Large-scale immigration

came to an end, immigrants tended to settle down in America permanently. Civic and community organizations took the lead in promoting citizenship, encouraging fluency in English and becoming involved in American politics. Many Hungarian-owned businesses were established to serve Hungarian residents and neighborhoods. Second-generation immigrants became active in professional, business and political activities. All these changes brought the immigrant community into the mainstream of American society and made possible the social, economic and cultural progress made by the second generation. At the same time, immigrant institutions continued to play an important role, particularly in transmitting the traditions of immigrant life to the second and third generations.

The third stage of immigrant social development is the complex period since 1940. This stage witnessed the arrival of post-war immigrants in three major streams: in 1949–1951, in 1956–1958, and since 1960. These immigrants were usually well-educated, had professional attainments and were eager to establish themselves in professional careers. Their major impact was to accentuate the trends toward the growth of professional and business occupations. In the past three decades, they have become well integrated into American educational, social and business life, thereby giving strong encouragement to Hungarian immigrants and their descendants to integrate with and adapt to American society.

Throughout the three stages of development discussed, but particularly in the period since 1940, American society experienced unprecedented social, economic, demographic, institutional and geographical changes as well. Some of these changes can be indicated only in very general terms: increasing urbanization and industrialization in the eastern states, followed by suburban development, decline of urban centers, and movement of urban populations to suburban residential and employment centers. Another recent trend was the migration of population from urban centers in the east to suburban centers in the west, southwest and southeast. Still another change is the increasing professionalization of occupations, decline of manual labor occupations and higher educational requirements for employment. All these very significant changes have transformed the Hungarian community in the United States. The most significant general trends have been the decline of urban ethnic communities, suburban migration of immigrant groups, increasing assimilation into American society, and general decline of commitment to immigrant places, traditions, communities and values. As a result of the increasing professionalization of American life, immigrant groups have sought and obtained professional qualifications and have integrated into American professional occupations. In view of the strong geographical mobility of the population, there are now significant concentrations of Hungarians in California, Florida and Arizona.⁵

On the basis of the preceding discussion, I am prepared to state my first premise: Hungarian communities have preserved several major cultural traditions during their American presence which include the following:

1. Traditions expressing an attachment to family, kinship, religious values and ethnic traditions as understood by Hungarian immigrant communities. These ethnic tradi-

tions were centered on religious customs, ethnic loyalties, and memories of the village community or a particular Hungarian region.

2. Commitment to social and economic advancement in America. First generation immigrants were strongly committed to economic advancement and this commitment played a significant role in the second and third generations. The dedication and persistence of first generation ancestors is frequently cited as a strong motivating factor by members of the second and third generations.

3. Respect for values such as ethnic heritage, religious traditions, and regional identification both in Hungary and the United States. These attachments are considered highly significant and are approved. Immigrant communities are considered good examples of these values.

4. Hungarian communities and individuals have widely accepted American values of individualism, economic competition, personal advancement, freedom of expression and activity and have incorporated them into their value systems.

My second premise is that as a result of the substantial economic, social, demographic, and institutional transformations affecting Hungarian ethnic communities, there is a priority need to strengthen and reaffirm the cultural traditions of Hungarian ethnic communities. This can best be accomplished by recognizing those cultural traditions that are still of value and importance to Hungarian communities and strengthening them in such a way that they can be updated and made meaningful to the present generation. I propose therefore the definition and elaboration of a set of activities designed to strengthen and affirm cultural traditions in accordance with current perceptions. The following is a preliminary list of such activities which may form the basis of further discussion and resolution:

1. Affirmation and reinforcement of Hungarian national awareness in American society.
2. Provision of basic information pertaining to the history, political development, geography, literature, art, music and folk traditions of Hungary.
3. The practice of folk arts, crafts, folk dance, decorative arts in existing Hungarian communities.
4. Exchange programs, fellowships, university summer programs in Hungary.
5. Cultural events in the United States illustrating Hungarian traditions of music, arts, dance, history, customs and contemporary life.
6. Programs to preserve documents and historic places of the American-Hungarian experience, programs to publish and distribute sources and historical studies of American-Hungarian history.
7. University-level and academic programs to provide instruction, research and studies of Hungarian history, literature, ethnography, political development, urban development and economic life.

My third and final proposal is one that relates to the realization of such a set of priorities in the United States. Since I am familiar with the issues facing Hungarian organizations, I am well aware of the difficulties of proposing and executing program of this magnitude and complexity. For that reason I am proposing two preliminary steps at this time:

First, I propose the creation of an interdisciplinary, interorganizational coordinating committee with the responsibility of developing a detailed program and proposing an implementation for such a program. The committee would develop a more detailed definition of each of the seven points listed under my second premise. Following the completion of that task, the committee would propose an implementation mechanism for the programs it has defined. The key element of this proposal is the composition of the committee. It would be my suggestion that the committee should be representative of all major groups of the American-Hungarian community, including local and regional ethnic communities, local and national Hungarian organizations, professional, academic and educational organizations, including the Hungarian Chair at Indiana University. It is my contention that a committee representing all groups of the American Hungarian community can best define the programs to be established and propose the most effective mechanism for implementing those programs.

Second, I propose the establishment of an Information Clearinghouse which would collect, preserve and distribute on request significant information on issues relating to Hungary, as stated under point 2 in my second premise, as well as on issues and activities in the Hungarian community. In my view, such a clearinghouse would be essential for any future organized activity seeking to strengthen the Hungarian community. It would be premature to state at this time how this clearinghouse should be organized, but it would certainly be advisable that its establishment be supported by the proposed coordinating committee, as stated in my first proposal. It would be one of the key elements of a program to strengthen cultural traditions for American Hungarians.

I hope that this analysis and the proposals made to address the needs of the American Hungarian community will provoke further discussion, exchange of ideas, but above all, specific steps required to preserve American Hungarian cultural traditions.

As a final note I venture to suggest that the initiative of the Hungarian Chair in support of the two proposals indicated would be highly appropriate.

Notes

1. On the emigrant background, including statistical data on emigration, see the following studies: Julianna Puskás, *Emigration from Hungary to the United States before 1914* (Budapest, 1975); Julianna Puskás, *Kivándorló magyarok az Egyesült Államokban, 1880-1940* (Budapest, 1982); Julianna Puskás, *From Hungary to the United States, 1880-1914* (Budapest, 1982); István Rác, *A paraszti migráció és politikai megítélése Magyarországon* (Budapest, 1980); Paul Bódy, *Emigration from Hungary, 1880-1956*, in *Struggle and Hope. The Hungarian-Canadian Experience* (Toronto, 1982).
2. On settlement history and patterns, see the following: Paul Bódy and Mary Boros-Kazai, *Hungarian Immigrants in Greater Pittsburgh, 1880-1980*, Hungarian Ethnic Heritage Study of Pittsburgh (Pittsburgh, 1981) Julianna Puskás, *Kivándorló magyarok az Egyesült Államokban, 1880-1940* (Budapest, 1982); M. H. Abonyi and J. A. Anderson, *Hungarians of Detroit* (Detroit, 1977); H. Bardin, *The Hungarians in Bridgeport* (Bridgeport, 1959); Susan M. Papp, *Hungarian Americans and their Communities of Cleveland* (Cleveland, 1981). Works in preparation include: a major study of Cleveland by J. Puskás, a study of Hungarians in Chicago by Zoltán Fejős and a study by A. Ludányi on Toledo.

3. Information on Hungarian organizations: Török István, *Katolikus magyarok Észak-Amerikában* (Youngstown, 1978); Béky Zoltán, *Az amerikai magyar református egyesület történetének főbb eseményei, 1896–1970* (Ligonier, 1970); Sándor Kalassay, *Educational and Religious History of the Hungarian Reformed Church in the US*, Ph.D. Diss. 1939, University of Pittsburgh; Mary Boros-Kazai and Paul Bódy, *Hungarian Community Life in Greater Pittsburgh*, Hungarian Ethnic Heritage Study of Pittsburgh (Pittsburgh, 1981); Paul Bódy, *The William Penn Association, 1886–1986*, Pennsylvania Ethnic Heritage Newsletter, 1987.
4. Transformation of Hungarian Communities: Steven B. Várdy, *The Hungarian Americans* (New York, 1985); Paul Bódy, *Hungarian Immigrant Communities in Greater Pittsburgh*, unpublished paper, 1986; Joshua Fishman, *Hungarian Language Maintenance in the United States* (Bloomington, 1966); Paul Bódy and Mary Boros-Kazai, *Hungarian Immigrants in Greater Pittsburgh, 1880–1980*, Hungarian Ethnic Heritage Study of Pittsburgh (Pittsburgh, 1981).
5. Bibliographies and Documentation: Mary Boros-Kazai, *Hungarian Historical Sources and Collections in Greater Pittsburgh*, Hungarian Ethnic Heritage Study of Pittsburgh (Pittsburgh, 1981); August J. Molnár, *Hungarian American Archives and Other Research Resources, The Folk Arts of Hungary* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1981); Julianna Puskás, *Fontosabb levéltári forrás csoportok és gyűjtemények*, and *Az Egyesült Államokban megjelent magyar nyelvű újságok és folyóiratok címjegyzéke 1853–1944*, in *Kivándorló magyarok az Egyesült Államokban* (Budapest, 1982); Ruth Biro, *Bibliographical Guide to Hungarian American Sources in Hungarian Ethnic Heritage Study of Pittsburgh* (Pittsburgh, 1981).

Table 1
States Ranked by Hungarian (Native Language) Population
1910 US Census

State	Rank	%	Number
New York	1	24.1	76 100
Pennsylvania	2	19.9	62 779
Ohio	3	18.7	59 040
New Jersey	4	10.9	34 340
Illinois	5	6.1	19 270
Connecticut	6	4.4	13 725
Indiana	7	3.2	10 290
Michigan	8	2.4	7 653
West Virginia	9	1.5	4 866
Wisconsin	10	1.3	4 195

States Ranked by Hungarian (Native Language) Population
1920 US Census

State	Rank	%	Number
Ohio	1	20.7	97 962
New York	2	19.8	93 606
Pennsylvania	3	16.8	79 630
New Jersey	4	12.5	59 190
Illinois	5	6.1	29 041
Michigan	6	5.9	27 763
Connecticut	7	4.5	21 093
Indiana	8	3.2	15 357
West Virginia	9	2.0	9 420
Wisconsin	10	1.5	7 338

States Ranked by Hungarian Population
1980 US Census

State	Rank	%	Number
New York	1	13.8	244 672
Ohio	2	13.7	243 232
Pennsylvania	3	11.4	203 285
New Jersey	4	9.5	168 500
California	5	9.3	164 903
Michigan	6	7.1	126 819
Florida	7	5.0	89 587
Illinois	8	4.8	84 642
Connecticut	9	3.0	53 451
Indiana	10	2.5	44 312

Table 2
Hungarian Population by State, 1980 US Census

Alabama	4 480	Montana	3 129
Alaska	1 534	Nebraska	4 452
Arizona	19 199	Nevada	5 926
Arkansas	2 444	New Hampshire	3 390
California	164 903	New Jersey	168 500
Colorado	15 792	New Mexico	3 495
Connecticut	53 451	New York	244 672
Delaware	3 402	North Carolina	9 072
D. C.	2 500	North Dakota	4 291
Florida	89 587	Ohio	243 232
Georgia	9 877	Oklahoma	4 591
Hawaii	2 294	Oregon	10 908
Idaho	1 874	Pennsylvania	203 285
Illinois	84 642	Rhode Island	2 566
Indiana	44 312	South Carolina	4 071
Iowa	4 883	South Dakota	1 818
Kansas	5 122	Tennessee	5 983
Kentucky	5 627	Texas	27 964
Louisiana	6 630	Utah	2 639
Maine	2 387	Vermont	2 574
Maryland	27 901	Virginia	22 306
Massachusetts	20 122	Washington	15 885
Michigan	126 819	West Virginia	11 557
Minnesota	15 663	Wisconsin	33 124
Mississippi	1 794	Wyoming	1 416
Missouri	18 817		

These data are based on responses to question 14 in the 1980 US Census, as follows: Question 14. What is this person's ancestry? Print the ancestry group with which the person identifies. Ancestry (or origin or descent) may be viewed as the nationality group, the lineage, or the country in which the person or the person's parents or ancestors were born before their arrival in the United States. Source: 1980 Census of the Population. Ancestry of the Population by State, 1980. PC80-S1-10. Washington, D. C., April 1983.

Table 3
Emigration from Hungary, 1870-1970
(of Hungarian ethnic origin)

Period	Total Emigration	Emigration to US	Emigration to Canada
1870-1914	639 541	556 439	8 000
1921-1941	150 000	38 541	33 000
1945-1970	300 000	67 869	49 566
1870-1970	1 089 541	662 849	90 566

Source: N. F. Dreisziger, *Struggle and Hope: The Hungarian-Canadian Experience* (Toronto, 1982), p. 28.