

## **Aspects of Hungarian Settlement in Central Canada, 1921-1931**

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In many respects the history of Canada's Central and East European ethnic groups is an unexplored field. This is especially true in the case of Hungarian Canadians. Aside from the work of Professor M. L. Kovacs on the Saskatchewan settlements, and a sociological study by the late John Kosa on some one hundred Ontario families, no professional scholar so far has done research on the history of these people.<sup>1</sup> No substantial work has been undertaken, for example, on their largest settlements, the Hungarian neighbourhoods of Central Canada's big cities.<sup>2</sup> This paper is a part of a larger effort to fill in this great gap in Hungarian Canadian historiography, mainly dealing with a critical period, the 1920s, when the most significant growth in Hungarian immigration took place, and when Central Canada's largest Magyar "ghettos" emerged in Toronto and Montreal. Besides offering some statistical information on the subject, the author will try to find out the contributions by various factors to the bringing about of the same. By doing so, we hope to make some progress towards answering the question, why immigrants flocked to the cities just at that time, in clear contradiction to Canada's "officially stated immigration policy . . . 'Only Farmers Need Apply.'"<sup>3</sup>

According to the 1971 census, 131,890 people of Hungarian origin lived in Canada. In this context, the census records reveal two important characteristics. First, it was a highly urbanized group; second, its core was to be found in Central Canada. According to the official statistics, 81 percent of Hungarians resided in cities, compared with only 76 percent of Canada's population as a whole. Only nine percent of Hungarian Canadians were referred to as farm residents. The census also shows that almost 60 percent of Hungarians lived in Central Canada, mainly in Ontario.<sup>4</sup>

The picture presented in the 1971 figures sharply contrasts with the group's distribution during the early part of this century, their formative period in Canada. Detailed figures exist only for 1921 and they list 13,181 Hungarians. Of these, only about one ninth lived in cities with

populations of 30,000 and over and only about 14 percent in Central Canada, mostly in Ontario. The rest lived mainly in Saskatchewan.<sup>5</sup>

The half-century between 1921 and 1971 saw great changes in the group's extent of urbanization and geographic distribution. The casual observer might seek explanation for these developments in the massive industrialization undertaken during and since the Second World War, and in the post-war influx of new immigrants. Indeed, both of these developments should be regarded as contributory factors. But a close examination of Hungarian Canadian records reveals that the greatest, most important impetus towards these changes had come between 1921 and 1931. Indeed, a study of the census figures of these two years reveals this decade as a watershed for Hungarian Canadians, separating their predominantly rural past in Saskatchewan from a largely urban future mostly in Central Canada.

The decade separating the censuses of 1921 and 1931 caused important differences in the immigration and settling patterns of the group. The fact is that the years 1924-1930 saw the immigration of Magyars to Canada on a scale unprecedented and unequalled until the coming of the refugees of the late 1950s. The roots of this trend seem to go back to developments outside Canada. In East Central Europe, the First World War and its turbulent aftermath had seen the demise of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and the dismemberment of the Kingdom of Hungary. These events caused grave and long-lasting problems for an already weak economy because of which a growing proportion of the population became desirous of leaving their homeland and beginning a new life overseas. Before 1914 most Hungarian emigrants were heading for the United States. By the early 1920s, however, the Republic's gates were virtually shut to East Europeans. Hungarians wishing to leave war-torn and impoverished Europe had to look for solutions elsewhere. When the wartime ban on Hungarian immigration was lifted by Ottawa in 1923, many Magyars decided to come to Canada. The following spring the "new immigration" to Canada began and by the end of the decade close to 28,000 Hungarians had made their way to the Dominion.

The size of this population movement was limited only by the reluctance of the Hungarian government to allow a mass-exodus, and the insistence of Canadian policy-makers that only "bona-fide" agriculturalists (farmers and farm-workers) should come to the country. Although the Canadian government tried its best to keep non-agrarian elements out, many Hungarians who were not really peasants, or did not really have in mind working on the land after arriving, managed to come to Canada — even if to the West, the enforced destination of the vast

majority of newcomers. Their subsequent migration to cities, no doubt, helped to increase the rate of urbanization of the Hungarian-Canadian group during the second half of the 1920s.

But even new Hungarian immigrants from rural Hungary were different in many ways from the Hungarian pioneers who had come to Saskatchewan and Manitoba a generation earlier. Being the products of the twentieth century, they underwent better schooling (relatively speaking) and had gathered broader experience as soldiers during the war or its aftermath, including a taste of life in the big cities and in foreign countries. They had also been exposed to new political ideologies and systems. It is not surprising, under these circumstances, that many of them lacked the perseverance necessary to "make it" in prairie farming. Many early pioneers tended to stay on their homesteads because they knew no other lifestyle. For the bulk of the newcomers working on a farm was not so much a calling or tradition, but a means to save some money to pay debts, or the passage of a loved-one, or to return "rich" to Hungary. For these people a well-paying city job was just as attractive as or even more so than farming. When the demand for farm labour declined, or when urban employment promised to be better paying or more steady, the new immigrants seldom hesitated over moving to the city and even leaving the prairies altogether.

Given the nature of the new immigration, it is not remarkable that in the 1921-1931 period Hungarian-Canadian society should have undergone not a mere three-fold increase, but also two other marked demographic changes. One was their dispersal across much of Canada, the other, their rapid urbanization. A brief look at census data will illustrate the magnitude of these processes. Between 1921 and 1931, despite the enormous influx of newcomers, Saskatchewan's Hungarian population increased by only 48 percent. In this same time Manitoba's more than doubled, and Alberta's increased five times. More importantly, Ontario's already substantial Hungarian population underwent an eight-fold increase, and Quebec's grew from less than a hundred to over four thousand. In 1921 slightly more than two-thirds of Hungarian Canadians lived in Saskatchewan. A decade later, less than a third did.<sup>6</sup>

The progress of the group's urbanization seems equally remarkable. In 1921 some 9,748 of Canada's 13,181 Hungarians were rural residents. Not more than 3,433 lived in towns and cities. A decade later, over twenty thousand did, very nearly half of the group. In 1921 only 11 percent lived in cities. By 1931 this figure grew to 30 percent.<sup>7</sup> From being the 25th most urbanized ethnic group in 1921, Hungarians advanced to the rank of 12th in the course of a decade. The original group

of five cities with over 200 Hungarians grew to more than a dozen, half of them with at least a thousand.<sup>8</sup>

Central Canada played a major role in the transformation of the distribution of the Hungarian-Canadian population in this period. It was in this region that the greatest growth took place, and it was the cities of the Lower Great Lakes-St. Lawrence Valley which attracted the most Hungarians. These places had acted as recipients of Hungarian immigrants in an earlier period, in the decade before 1914. We know that Hungarians, coming in some instances from the United States, in others from the prairies, had appeared in many parts of southern Ontario soon after the turn of the century. By about 1914, Hamilton, Welland, Brantford, Windsor, Niagara Falls, Galt, etc., all had nuclei of Hungarian colonies.<sup>9</sup>

Little or no population growth seems to have taken place in the midst of Hungarian Canadians between 1921 and 1923. These were the years of the post-war economic depression when the wartime ban on immigration from Hungary was still in effect. But in 1924 things began to change; the recession ended and the immigration of Hungarians was once again permitted by the Canadian government. The result was the renewed growth of the Hungarian element in Central Canada's towns and cities. The first signs of the new expansion came in the region which had experienced the greatest influx during the pre-war years: Southern Ontario. In 1926 a journalist from Hungary toured this region and, in addition to encountering his countrymen in their older, pre-war centres, found some in Oshawa, St. Catharines, Port Colborne, Thorold, and St. Thomas. But the region's largest Hungarian conglomeration was in Hamilton. In fact, the observer described this city as the "Hungarian capital of Eastern Canada." Hamilton's Magyar neighbourhood, after a growth until the post-war economic slump of the early twenties, declined to a couple hundred people. But with the return of better economic conditions in 1924, and the settling in of the new immigration, it began to flourish again. By the time of the 1931 census, it numbered well over two thousand.<sup>10</sup>

The largest centres of Hungarian life in Canada today are to be found in Toronto and Montreal. Neither city possessed a Magyar community worthy of note before 1914. It was only during the mass immigration of the 1920s that viable Hungarian neighbourhoods developed in them.

Of the two cities, Montreal was the first to have a small core of a Hungarian population. During the pre-war days, several families and single people took up residence in the city. The size of the city's Hungarian community did not change for many years, but after 1925 it began to grow. Organizational life started with the establishment of a congre-

tion by the United Church in the spring of the following year. This was followed, two years later, by the founding of a Roman Catholic parish. In the meantime, the colony's first lay organization, the Hungarian Social Club, also appeared on the scene. Subsequently, others came into being, including the Szekely Cultural Society, the German-Hungarian Club and a sick-benefit association. By the end of the decade, Montreal's Magyar population was approaching the 3,600 mark, and may have even exceeded that figure during the winters as a result of the usual influx of unemployed agricultural workers.<sup>11</sup> Montreal's Magyar population surpassed all other Hungarian Canadian centres in size. Its position, as the most influential centre as well, depended not only on the growth potential of the much older centres such as Winnipeg, but on the rate of increase of the newly established Magyar neighbourhood in the rival metropolis of Toronto.

Toronto's Hungarian community had a rather late start. A few immigrants from Hungary, mainly Jews, had settled in the city prior to the war, but were not joined by too many others until the 1920s. Organizational life among Hungarians in Toronto had its beginning in 1926. In the spring of that year the Presbyterian Church founded a mission among Hungarian Calvinists. Two years later both the Lutheran and the United Churches followed suit. In the meantime the community's growing Roman Catholic congregation was also being served by missionaries; but late in 1929 the Hungarian Catholic Club, Toronto's first important lay organization, was formed. It soon began working towards the establishment of a Roman Catholic Parish.<sup>12</sup>

Despite its size, well over a thousand people by the end of the decade, Toronto's Magyar community remained a satellite of the older southern-Ontario communities in smaller urban centres. Hungarian Toronto's proximity to centres like Hamilton and Welland prevented it from becoming an influential organizational centre in the 1920s. A generation later this very same geographical factor was to help the city's Hungarians eventually to assume leadership and outshine all its rivals.

By the time of the 1931 census five Central Canadian cities contained Hungarian communities with over a thousand members: Montreal, Hamilton, Welland-Crowland, Toronto, and Windsor.<sup>13</sup> This represented a remarkable change considering that ten years earlier the largest colony, Brantford, numbered less than 300. Even more striking is the fact that the largest of these new Magyar colonies grew up in Montreal, a city which had hardly had a Hungarian population in 1921.

The growth of the urban settlements of Central Canada heavily reflected the group's geographic redistribution within Canada. By 1931,

Ontario's Hungarian population, a mere 13 percent of the Canadian total ten years before, surpassed that of all other provinces, including Saskatchewan. It constituted a full third of the national total. Together with Quebec's four thousand Hungarians (mainly residents of Montreal), Central Canada accounted for 44 percent of the country's Magyar population.<sup>14</sup>

Limitations in space preclude a long discussion of the causes of these impressive changes. It should be enough to say that both the "push" and "pull" factors of immigration seem to have been active in the process. As far as the former are concerned, we need only to refer to a few Western Canadian developments. Thus, by the second half of the decade only marginal land was available for homesteading. At the same time, the general economic prosperity inflated the price of good land and placed rapid mechanization within the reach of farmers. The boom was followed by the great bust of 1929-30 which witnessed the collapse of the wheat economy. These developments contributed to the driving away of people, especially newcomers, from the prairies. As the cities of the West could absorb only a small portion of these people, the work-seekers had to try their luck in the East.

The "push" of the West was supplemented by the "pull" of the East, that is, the attractions of the cities of the Lower Great Lakes-St. Lawrence River region. Until 1929, the main factor at work here was the availability of jobs. The expansion of manufacturing, service industries, and public works created a demand for both skilled and unskilled labour. In the Niagara Peninsula the main employer of immigrant labour was the Welland Canal improvement project. Also important were the blast furnaces and shops of Welland and Hamilton.<sup>15</sup> In Toronto the demand for immigrant workers, especially unskilled labour, was rather limited; nevertheless, the city did offer a livelihood to numerous immigrants including (after 1926) many Hungarians. In the Province of Quebec, Montreal provided employment for thousands of unskilled and semi-skilled people. In many of the city's industries, wages were low and work lasted only while the port of Montreal was open to navigation. The resulting hardships — low incomes and long periods of unemployment — made these industries unattractive to native Canadians. Immigrants, often thankful to have any means of income, moved in and became the chief source of cheap labour in the city.<sup>16</sup> Montreal's special attraction for Hungarians was its Hungarian Consulate whose offices most Magyars in Central Canada visited at one time or another during their first years of stay in Canada.

The more Central Canada's Hungarian neighbourhoods grew, the

more attractive they became to Hungarians outside them. The degree and quality of social and religious life that was made possible by large, fairly compact urban groupings, proved almost irresistible to many newcomers from Canada's agricultural, mining, or lumber frontiers, whose craving for social and spiritual fulfillment had rarely been satisfied since they had left Hungary. This factor continued to attract Hungarians to the cities of Central Canada long after the job market had collapsed with the coming of the Great Depression.

The push of the prairies and the pull of the eastern cities did not equally affect all sections of Hungarian Canadian society. Census statistics show exactly which elements of Canada's Magyar community participated least and most in this great migration. They reveal, for example, that the trend towards urbanization was not strong among second-generation Hungarian Canadians. Less than 38 percent of these were urban dwellers in 1931. New-immigrant Hungarians, on the other hand, were 56 percent urbanized. Moreover, the data also reveal the existence of an inverse relation between the immigrants' length of residence in Canada and their extent of urbanization. In fact, the least urbanized Hungarian-Canadian group were the immigrants who came before 1910. Only 29 percent of them lived in towns and cities in 1931. The percentage for the 1911-1920 group was 39. For the post-war groups the ratios were markedly higher. It was 54 percent for those who came between 1921 and 1925. For the very numerous 1926-1930 group it was 62.4 percent. To put it simply, less than a third of the "old" immigrants had ended up in the cities by 1931, while almost two-thirds of those who arrived in the late 1920s had become urban residents. Moreover, the ratios were even higher in Central Canada. In Ontario approximately three-quarters of the post-1926 arrivals had become city dwellers by 1931.<sup>17</sup>

The growth of Hungarian neighbourhoods in Central Canada's cities in the 1921-31 period was primarily the result of the new immigration. So many of the new arrivals abandoned the prairies and flocked to Central Canadian cities that already existing Hungarian cores vastly increased in size, and large Magyar neighbourhoods came into being where none had existed before. The size and impact of this migration can only be understood when we realize that 92 percent of the population of Ontario's Magyar urban groupings was made up of post-1921 arrivals. The equivalent figure for Montreal's Hungarian population is even higher — about 97 percent.<sup>18</sup> These figures suggest that what really happened in the period under discussion here was nothing less than the birth of a new and different Hungarian Canadian entity, an ethnic group

concentrated in Central Canada, more precisely, in Central Canada's cities.

Little is known at present about the genesis of this new, increasingly "Central Canadian" Hungarian population. From a few, rather unreliable sources historians can trace the milestones of its development. They can even speculate on the causes of its beginnings, although in this connection too, more extensive research is needed. Least known of all is the actual process of internal migrations which resulted in the Hungarian-Canadian group's drastic demographic redistribution during the 1921-1931 period. What this paper has tried to argue is that the birth of the "new" Hungarian Canadian groupings in the 1920s was primarily the outcome of post-1924 immigration. If this indeed is the case, a fuller understanding of this process can come first and foremost from a careful and exhaustive historical study of the nature of this immigration and of the life stories of its members during the first several years of their stay in Canada. Such a study would require a major archival and aural research effort. One hopes that the opportunity for undertaking it will come before the passage of time and the inevitable deaths of this migration's participants will have made aural research impossible, and the disappearance of more and more of such primary sources as personal letters, diaries, and photographs will certainly render any research on the subject more difficult.

## NOTES

1. Martin Louis Kovács, *Esterhazy and Early Hungarian Immigration to Canada* (Regina: Canadian Plains Research Centre, 1974). John Kósa, *Land of Choice: The Hungarians in Canada* (Toronto, 1957).
2. John Kósa, "Hungarian Immigrants in North America: Their Residential Mobility and Ecology," in *Canadian Journal of Economics and Political Science*, 22 (August 1956), 3.
3. Howard Palmer in the *Canadian Historical Review*, 58 (December 1977), 4, p. 502.
4. *1971 Census of Canada*, vol. I, Part 3, "Population: Ethnic Groups," Table 3.
5. *Census of Canada, 1931*, vol. I (Ottawa, 1936), Table 35.
6. Based on figures provided in *Sixth Census of Canada, 1921*, vol. I (Ottawa, 1924), and W. B. Hurd, *Racial Origins and Nativity of the Canadian People, 1931* (Ottawa, 1942), Table 6.
7. *Census of Canada, 1931*, vol. I, Table 35; Hurd, *Racial Origins*, p. 97 and Table 40.
8. *Census of Canada, 1931*, vol. II (Ottawa, 1933), Table 33.
9. Jenő Ruzsa, *A Kanadai Magyarság Története (The History of Canadian Hungarians*, Toronto, 1940), the chapter on Ontario. Ödön Paizs, *Magyarok Kanadában (Hungarians in Canada*, Budapest, 1928), 197-215. Peter A. Vay, *Amerikai naplókivonatok, utijegyzetek, levéltörédek (American Diary Excerpts*,

- Travel Notes, Letters*, Budapest, 1910), p. 118. Interview with Géza Kertész and László Jakus, August 1973. Also, *Sixth Census of Canada, 1921*, vol. I, Table 28.
10. Paizs, 198–206. Ruzsa, 210f. *1931 Census*, vol. II, Table 33.
  11. Mihály Fehér, *Jubileumi Emlékkönyv: Jubilee Album 1926–1966* (Montreal, 1966), I. Ruzsa, 287–312. John Kósa, *Immigration and Adjustment of Hungarians in Canada*, ms., 364.
  12. Ruzsa, 162–63 and 176f. Fehér, 17. *Canadian Hungarian News* (Winnipeg), 14 July 1928. Interview with the Rev. Charles Steinmetz, 28 November 1976.
  13. Statistics for the Central Canadian centres are as follows: Montreal, 3,514; Hamilton, 2,183; Welland-Crowland, 1,680; Toronto, 1,354; Windsor, 1,078; Port Colborne, 946. By comparison, the figures for Winnipeg, Regina, and Calgary are 1,664, 822, and 688 respectively. *1931 Census*, vol. II, Table 33.
  14. *1931 Census*, Table 31. The provincial breakdowns were as follows: Ontario 34%; Saskatchewan 33%; Alberta 14%; Quebec 10%; Manitoba 5%; British Columbia 3%.
  15. Interview with Géza Kertész and László Jakus, August 1973 (see fn. 9). Paizs, 198–206.
  16. Terry Copp, *The Anatomy of Poverty: The Conditions of the Working Class in Montreal, 1897–1929* (Toronto, 1974), esp. Chapter 9.
  17. *1931 Census*, Table 30. It is interesting to note that some 71% of the 1926–30 arrivals who settled in Saskatchewan remained on the farms.
  18. *Ibid.*



## Early Hungarian-Canadian Culture

Martin L. Kovács

Nowadays very few observers are aware of the existence not only of a considerable body of prairie poetry and other early writings in Hungarian, but of the fact that one or two of the pioneers, now in their eighties, still continue to give vent to their emotions in their ancestral language. Perhaps even scarcer are those who appreciate the significance, cultural and social, of the one-time communities of Magyar peasant farmers of the Canadian West. The objective of the present study is to discuss, to some extent at least, these important aspects of Canadian prairie history.

Prior to the 1920s, Saskatchewan contained most of the Hungarian Canadian settlers and practically all of what might be termed "bloc settlements." Particularly during and since the Great Depression considerable out-migration has taken place from the province, mainly to Ontario and, in a smaller measure, to British Columbia. The number of Hungarian-Canadian residents of the province may be estimated at about 16,000 with more than 3,000 residing in Regina.<sup>1</sup>

### *A folk community*

*Békevár*, situated some ten miles south of present-day Kipling, was a Hungarian-Canadian farmer community established in 1900.<sup>2</sup> For several reasons this settlement can be regarded as the major centre of Hungarian-Canadian folk culture in the West and as being almost unique, for that matter, on this continent. One factor is that the community very closely resembled a *folk society*, so eminently described in anthropo-sociological literature.<sup>3</sup> To express it in a nutshell, the pioneers of *Békevár* had come largely from three regions of the old country.<sup>4</sup> All were part of the folk society at large which had preserved the folkways, customs, and traditions of the rural style of life that had already become extinct in Western Europe many decades before, together in a great measure, with its cultural expressions. Newcomers to the great plains at the beginning of the century were left largely to their own devices and were expected to conquer from "Mother Nature" and civilize a virgin